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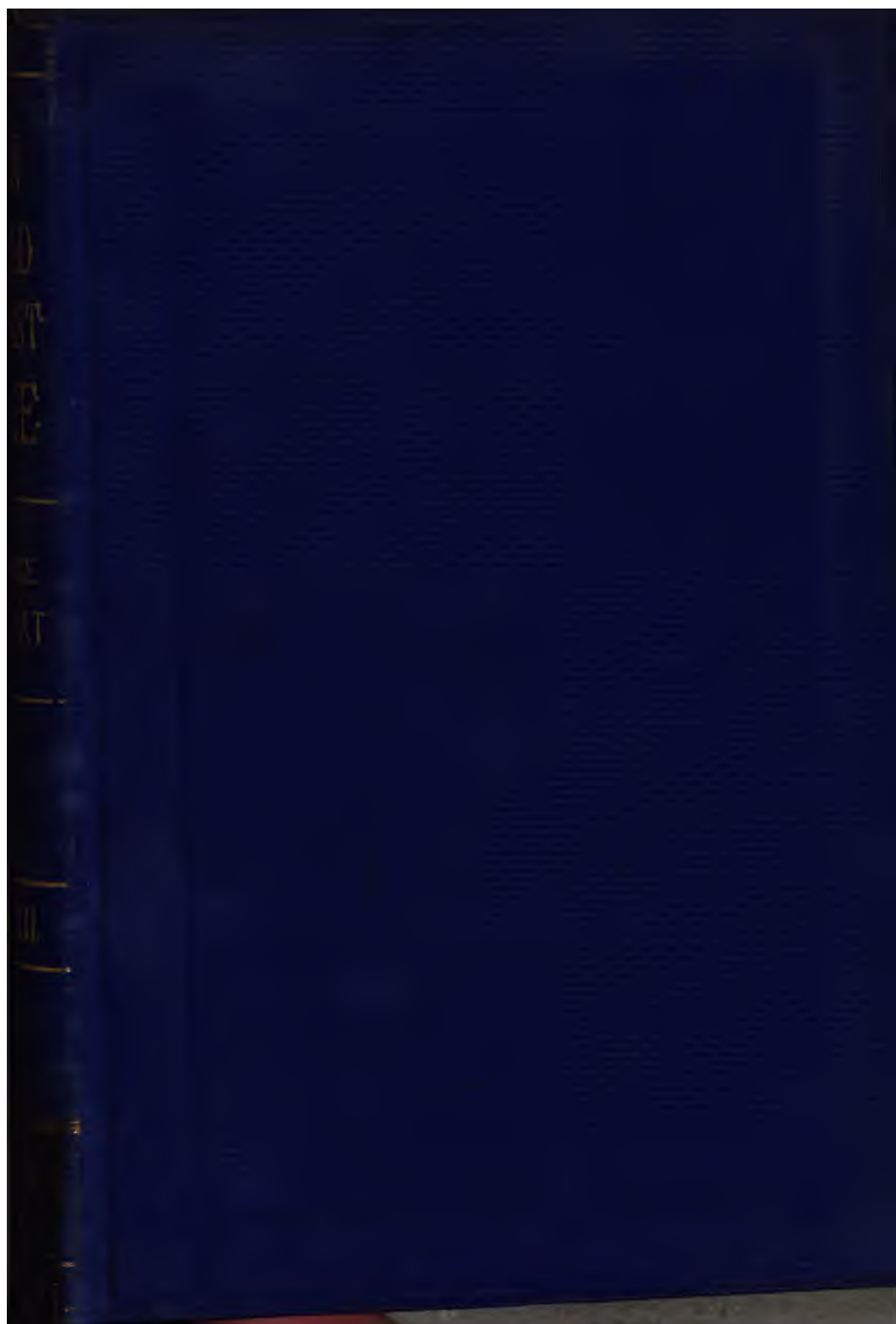
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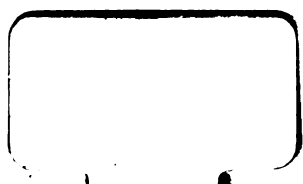
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HER WORLD AGAINST A LIE.

A Romance in Three Books.

BY
FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



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BOOK THE THIRD.

THE ATONEMENT.

' Nature hath assign'd

Two sovereign remedies for human grief :

Religion, surest, firmest, first and best,

Strength to the weak, and to the wounded balm ;

And strenuous Action next.'

SOUTHEY.



HER WORLD AGAINST A LIE.

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE ATONEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

‘ I WOULD GO WITH YOU ALL OVER THE WORLD.’

It is much easier to hide from the world than any one imagines who has not tried it. We are too apt to think ourselves of far greater importance than we are, and if we put it to the test we shall generally find that, except to a small and strictly private circle of admiring friends, it is not of the slightest consequence what we do, nor where we go.

And as to identity, we have but to journey a few miles from home to make the humiliating discovery that no one has the least idea who we are or where we come from. Even the most popular of public favourites have occasionally to pass through this soul-purifying process ; of how much less consequence, then, must the everyday ordinary mortals be who have never had the opportunity to make their voices heard !

Delia Moray finds out the truth of this to her advantage. She had a thousand scruples about accepting Mrs. Hephzibah's offer of the temporary use of her apartments in London, fearing lest she should be immediately recognised, and the news of her discovery communicated to her son. But her friend's answer was decisive :


‘ If you want to lose yourself, my dear, at any time of the year, go to London. People are far too busy there to have time to ask the

name of the person who lives next door to them. And then the place is empty now, and if you are really afraid of recognition, you have but to wait till the evening to go out. But don't forget that it is fourteen years since you left England, and you are so much improved and altered since that time, that I believe your own mother, if you had one, would pass you by without recognising you. If you stay in any of these gossiping continental towns you are a marked object, but they might as well try to track a minnow in the Thames as trace your whereabouts when once you have crossed the water. Of course I know they'll come after me to Antwerp, and I'm prepared to give them every satisfaction—rest assured of that! But the only thing I do counsel is, that you change your name. Call yourself Manners, or Mathews, or anything you like except Moray; for though my old landlady is dead,

and her daughter is as deaf as a post, yet she may have heard me mention your name in days gone by, and, like all women, she's as inquisitive as the Evil one.'

And therefore it is under the title of Mrs. Manners that Delia has introduced herself to Mrs. Horton's landlady, whom she finds only too anxious to make the friend of so old a customer comfortable in every respect.

Mrs. Hephzibah has promised to follow her to London as soon as she can do so without raising suspicion, but the days pass very wearily to Delia. She sits at the window half her time, watching the stream of cabs, omnibuses, and foot-passengers that throngs the thoroughfare, but the sight only sends her thoughts back to those sad days when she lived in the din and turmoil of the city, and had but one thought and aim in life—how best to provide her little Willie with



food to eat, and to shield his tender childhood from the insensate fury of his father.

How hard she worked and fared in those olden times ! Looking back upon them, her existence seems to have flown on like a placid river since, until this crowning misfortune came to disturb it. There is a tidal wave known in some tropical countries under the title of a 'bore.' No one can ever foretell when it is coming, but at some unexpected moment, when the river is calmly smiling in the sunlight, bearing its gallant freight of boats and barges and passengers, the awful 'bore' is descried approaching in the distance, raising its foaming crest far above the level of the highest mast; and before the crafts have time to furl their sails or put into shore, the tidal wave is down upon them, tossing them in the air, turning them over and over, snapping their timbers as though they were so much rotten

wood, and hurrying their living freight to a sudden and untimely end. This is what the cruel intervention of William Moray has been to Delia's hitherto peaceful life. In a moment it has wrecked all her chance of present or future happiness. As she ponders on the occurrences of the last week, and the changes they have wrought, she speculates whether she would not have done better by giving up her child when it was required of her, and letting him be reared as William Moray's son. But she cannot answer herself in the affirmative. She cannot with truth say that she regrets the sweet intercourse of years that has bound the heart of the son and mother so closely together, even though the wrench that separates them be all the harder for it. Angus may despise her now for the weakness she displayed in days gone by, and were she to abide by his side he might continue to reproach her with

it. But when he finds that they are really separated—not for a month nor a year, but for ever—when he knows what it is to love his own wife, and cherish his own children, his thoughts will fly back to the poor mother whose worst fault was her dread of losing him, and he will forgive her for a sin which has wrought no worse evil than her own broken heart.

This is Delia's faith. It is so strong that it bears her up, to the astonishment of herself, but it will not last. When the excitement is over the courage will fail, and nature denounce the cruel wrong that has been put upon her.

Naturally she passes much of her time in trying to decide upon her future course of life. She has sufficient money for her present need, but it will not last for ever, and when it is expended she must work. She cannot attempt to fill such a situation as she has

just abandoned, for in the first place, she has no character from her late employer ; and in the second, she has not the capability of teaching English children in their own language. To converse with the Demoiselles Landry whilst they were out walking was easy enough, but to sit down to instruct in grammar, and geography, and history, would be a different thing.

Delia feels that she has left tuition behind her altogether. The rooms she occupies, which are at the corner of a side street in the Strand, permit her eyes to fall, as she muses, on one of the flaming posters of the theatre, and cause her to debate whether it is impossible she should take up her old profession once more. She wonders whether she has quite forgotten how to speak, to sing, to dance !

The thought makes her smile, spite of her melancholy. She—at her age—to dream of

appearing before the public in such a capacity ! She does not know that she is twice as well worth paying to look at now, than she was in those days ! Still, the stage has other openings beyond those of burlesque, and if she is not so slim as she was at twenty, she is better able to undertake the higher walks of the drama. She is dreaming after this fashion one afternoon, and half undecided whether she will not look up her old manager, and tell her life's romance to him, when she hears an unusual scuffle on the stairs, and the next moment the door of her room has opened, and on the threshold, to her intense delight and surprise, stands Mrs. Hephzibah Horton.

‘O ! my dear friend,’ cries Delia, as she flies towards her. ‘You come as a godsend to me ! I did not suppose it possible, from your last letter, that you could be here for another week.’

‘And neither did I mean to be,’ replies Mrs. Hephzibah brusquely, as having saluted Delia with a sounding kiss, she disencumbers herself of her travelling attire, in which she looks much more like a man than a woman. ‘But, as usual, I’ve made a fool of myself. My dear, I’ve made the greatest fool of myself I ever did in my life this time.’

‘Heavens! Mrs. Hephzibah! what have you done?’

‘Nothing to do with your boy, my dear. I know that is what’s running in your mind, so the sooner I tell you all about it the better. Well, I’ve seen him!’

‘Yes! yes! O! what did he say? Does he think me cruel? Is he unhappy at our parting? Was he very anxious to learn where I had gone to?’

‘Now, look here! if you’re going to shake all over like a bad jelly, I shan’t tell you anything at all. Come and sit down by me

like a sensible woman, and you shall hear all I have to say in a very few words. The second day after you left Antwerp, a card was brought up to me at the hotel, with the name "Baron Gustave Saxe." Who's he? Did you know him in Bruges?

'O yes! a little,' says Delia, with flaming cheeks. 'He is only the uncle of my pupils — the brother-in-law of Chevalier Landry.'

'Well, considering he's only the uncle of your pupils, I don't see why you should get so red about it. Any way he came to see me, and I admitted him. He's a fine-looking man, I suppose, to such as care for hairy creatures — I don't. However, he could hardly speak a word of English, and he was in such a flutter, it was some time before I could understand what he wanted; but when it came out—what are you hanging down your head in that absurd manner for, Delia

Moray ? exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah, interrupting herself.

‘ I was only thinking. Did he speak of my boy, Mrs. Horton ? Was Angus with him ? ’ replies Delia hurriedly.

‘ No, he wasn’t with him. He had sent this grand Baron Saxe as ambassador to me to find out where you were gone. I did just what we had agreed upon. I produced the letter you left behind for me, and declared that was all I knew of the matter. Heaven forgive me ! I’ve never told so many falsehoods for anybody in my life before ! ’

‘ Dear, true friend ! And what did he say ? ’

‘ What could he say ? He read the letter, and expressed his disappointment and annoyance at its contents. He told me that your boy is very much cut up at your going, but that Dr. de Blois has consented to give him his daughter in consequence. ’

‘Thank God!’ exclaims Delia, with streaming eyes. ‘Then he will be happy!’

Mrs. Hephzibah does not think it well to let her friend know more than this. The baron also told her that Angus had peremptorily refused offers of assistance both from the doctor and Mr. William Moray, but she has little faith in his persevering in such refusals. She thinks she knows men better, and that to tell the mother of her son’s first decision, will only be to raise false hopes of his fidelity to her. It is better she should be prepared for the worst at once.

‘Yes, I suppose he will be happy,’ she answers, ‘as happy, that is, as men usually are for about three weeks after they get possession of a pretty face. I can’t say I’ve much dependence upon any of the sex.’

‘You never had, Mrs. Horton.’

‘I never had, my dear, and experience has justified my opinion of them.’

‘Do you think they will follow me to my home?’

‘*They!* Who do you mean by “they?”’

‘I should have said Angus.’

‘Not he! What would be the use of his following you? I’ve put them completely off the scent with respect to your being with me, and professed to be as injured as any one of them at being left in the lurch, and even had I not, Angus does not know my address.’

‘It is easily found.’

‘Not so easy as you may think, particularly now.’

‘Why particularly now?’

‘Because—well, I suppose I may as well make a clean breast of it at once, as sooner or later it must come out. Delia, my dear, turn your head this way and take a good

look at me, for here you see seated the greatest fool the United Kingdom has ever produced !'

'Mrs. Hephzibah !'

'I am, my dear ! I shouldn't have liked to confess it ten years ago, but I've done that during the last week that would make the worst case in the Earlswood Asylum ashamed to own me for a relation. *I've married little Bond !*

'You are *married !*

'Aye, you may well shriek so that they may hear you half way up the Strand ! but it's the truth. I've married him. He's been bothering me to do it, on and off, for the last twenty years ; and really, more to stop his worry than anything else, I just walked into a registrar's office with him the other day at Dover, and it was all over in ten minutes. For the sake of a little old man's folly, and ten minutes' want of strength of mind, I've

chained myself down to be a slave for the remainder of my life. O Lord! O Lord!

‘O! Mrs. Horton, let me congratulate you. You will be very happy—I am sure you will. Mr. Bond is so good and kind, and so truly attached to you; and then after all, you know, a solitary old age must be a very melancholy sort of thing.’

‘Delia Moray, try and be sensible,’ snaps Mrs. Hephzibah fiercely. ‘Couldn’t I have passed a very jolly old age without going and marrying a man? How have I managed hitherto? But you’re one of those women who never learn from experience. If you had had half a dozen husbands, each worse than the last, you’d still be disposed to try another for yourself, or to persuade your friends to do it on their own account.’

‘But Mr. Bond is such a dear kind little man,’ says Delia, laughing, spite of herself,

and you are so well suited to each other. I wonder it didn't happen long ago.'

'Well, it might just as well have happened then, or not at all, for I've had all the worry of his affairs and his boys on my hands for the last ten years. However, we've got rid of them now, for, as I told you in Bruges, Bob's been settled for ages, and Bill is to be married next month, so the old father means to retire altogether from business, and we thought we might as well live together as apart.'

'It is a delightful plan,' exclaims Delia.

'Well, child,' says Mrs. Hephzibah, leaning her head against the warm bosom of her friend in a way which is very foreign to her usual independent bearing. 'I cannot deny that the idea of rest is pleasant to me. I have worked very hard in my life, Delia, and I have borne a good deal of hardship and even insult alone—always alone—I never

had a creature to stand up for me against the world, and I felt it more than I cared to show. That was the reason that I often spoke and expressed myself more roughly than I felt. But to fight with the world is, after all, not a woman's province—at least it hasn't come to that yet. So I grew rather tired of it at times. And now to think there will be no need for me to work any more—except as it takes my fancy—is very restful, and very very sweet.'

She lies quiet for a minute or two, with her head on Delia's bosom, and when she raises it and turns to kiss her, the other could almost swear that there are tears upon her cheek.

'But if you are married,' says Delia presently, 'where is Mr. Bond?'

'At Hampstead, I suppose. He does not give the cottage up to Bill till next month.'

‘He is at Hampstead and you are here,’ cries Delia, still puzzled at the novelty of such a proceeding.

It is curious to mark the change that passes over Mrs. Horton at her words. All the new softened feeling seems to fade out at once under the influence of the old independence that has reigned for years.

‘And why not?’ she demands imperatively; ‘do you suppose because I’ve been bamboozled into entering into a contract to spend the rest of my days with him, that I’m going to behave exactly after the pattern of all the simpering idiots who promise and vow the same thing? I wonder you don’t know better! I was sixty-one last birthday, and William Bond was sixty-four! You hardly expected us to spend a honeymoon at Margate, did you? and get photographed under the same umbrella! We’ve lived apart all our lives and been very comfortable under it

—so what's the odds that we should separate for a few days now. It's this sort of thing that has degraded love-making and marriage to a species of buffoonery instead of a solemn pledge of friendship between two souls. It was convenient to marry the man at Dover, so I did it. It was convenient, on arriving in town, to let him go to Hampstead and pack up his traps, whilst I came on here, so we did it; and when it's convenient to both of us, I suppose we shall meet again to abide under the same roof, and there's an end of the matter.'

'You said Mr. Bond was going to pack up? Do you intend to go away again?' demands Delia, in a trembling voice. For all her boasted courage, she does not like the idea of losing sight of her strong-hearted friend so soon.

'Ah! my dear, that's the best of it! William has been rather sly over this

business, but I find now he has set his heart upon it for years past, and bought, in anticipation, a lovely little place down in the country, which has been tenanted until the close of last autumn, when he purposely refused to let it again. So it is ready for us whenever we choose to go to it, which I expect will be before very long.'

'I cannot fancy you in the country, Mrs. Horton.'

'No! I dare say not. Whilst I lived this hand-to-mouth sort of existence, compelled to work to-day for the bread to put it into my mouth to-morrow, the excitement of a town life was necessary to me, and I did not think I could endure any other. But now, that the struggle is over, and I shall have no harder duty than to toddle about after the old man and see that he is made comfortable, I fancy I shall enjoy bees, and flowers, and poultry, and all the paraphernalia that go to

make up a modest country home. But come, child, I am starving! Order me something to eat and drink, for mercy's sake, and then I shall be better able to tell you some of the plans William and I have been making for Cloverfield.'

Delia does Mrs. Hephzibah's bidding, but with a heavy heart. She cannot but rejoice at her friend's happiness, but she had so hoped, amidst the hardships of the new career she has chalked out for herself, to have preserved the blessing of her intimate companionship, that her fortitude fails before the prospect of the rural home at Cloverfield, which she may hear of, but will never see. When the meal she has ordered appears, she cannot partake of it, and Mrs. Hephzibah detects her want of appetite at once.

'Now, what's the meaning of this, Delia Moray? Have you been indulging in such an extravagant dinner that you cannot pos-

sibly touch a piece of bread and butter with your tea, or are you regretting already that you did not ask the advice of your boy—or perhaps that fine-bearded baron—before you decided upon running away? I said you would !’

‘O ! no ! Mrs. Horton, indeed I am not ! I fully made up my mind that it was necessary we should part, and whatever I feel—but, indeed, that has nothing to do with it. I have been thinking much however, lately, of my work in the future, and do you know I have a very strong inclination to go on the stage again.’

Mrs. Hephzibah lifts up her hands in astonishment.

‘On the stage ! A woman whose greatest aim in life is to conceal herself ! What next, in the name of Heaven !’

‘But I should not pass under my old name, Mrs. Horton, and I should try to get employ-

ment in Scotland or some of the northern counties of England, so that I think I should be as effectually hidden by that means as any other. And I must work, you see.'

'Are you bent upon this hair-brained plan of the stage?'

'Not at all. I dread it; but I know of no other alternative. I could not take up teaching again. It is too monotonous—without friends or home. I should have too much time to think.'

Here her voice breaks.

'If I hadn't been in such a hurry to satisfy my ungodly appetite,' says Mrs. Hephzibah, 'I might have saved you this explanation. For look here, my dear! William and I have been talking a great deal about you, as you may well believe, and we have a little plan for you on our own account, if you can only see it with our eyes. The fact is, the old man is much better off than you would

imagine. I suppose he's been robbing people right and left in that scrubby little office of his; but whether or no, we have a very tidy income, and the first thing he insists upon is that I'm to have my maid and my carriage, and Heaven knows what besides, and no trouble at all. I don't know whether the old fool intends to wrap me up in cotton wool and tissue-paper, like a wax doll, and keep me in a drawer, but to hear him talk, one would be almost tempted to believe it. However, I'm to have a companion or house-keeper; some one that is to look after the servants and order the meals for me—to take such duties off my hands, in fact, as an unmarried sister, living with me, might offer to do—and for those services, William is ready to pay a very fair salary, say a hundred a year! Now, what I say is, Delia Moray, will you fill that office for me?

‘O! Mrs. Hephzibah! can you ask me?’

Yes! yes! a thousand times over—but not for money. Let me come as your friend—make use of me in any way you will, but give me the happiness of feeling that my duty is a gift. A return (if that were possible) for all your great kindness to me.'

'But that is nonsense,' says Mrs. Horton, frowning; 'and if you persist in it, you'll only make us all uncomfortable together. I have the money to give. Why should you prevent my assisting you with it instead of a stranger?'

'Let it be just as you will, then; only, are you sure I shall be safe at Cloverfield?'

'I don't know where you could be better hid. It's a little village, it's true, but in the very heart of Hampshire, and you must remember we have both changed our names. We're not likely to have any friends to see us except Mr. Bond's sons—neither of whom have ever seen you. And to the gentry

round about, if there are any, you will appear as a perfect stranger. What is your decision ?

‘ I will go with you, dear friend, most gladly and thankfully, and remain with you as long as I can be useful, or circumstances will permit me to remain.’

‘ What do you mean by that ?’

‘ If Angus—or—or—any one else, should trace me to Cloverfield and try to follow me there, I might be compelled to quit you.’

‘ Now, who is this “any one else,” Delia ? Tell me the truth. Is it the baron with the high-sounding name who came after you to Antwerp ?’

‘ Dear Mrs. Horton ! I shall never marry him !’ says Delia agitatedly. ‘ He understands that perfectly. It is all over and done with, you may rest assured.’

‘ Have you refused him, then ? Did he propose to you ?’

Delia hangs her head.

‘How could I do anything but refuse him? He knows nothing of my reputed disgrace. He would never have spoken to me had he done so. His pride is as great as his birth.’

‘And so, poor child, you’ve had to give that prospect up too. Your son ought to develop into a good and great man to indemnify you for all you have lost for him. There! there! don’t cry. It’s only God who knows the future! Things may come right yet.’

‘Nothing can come right for me, dear friend; but so long as Angus is happy, I shall be content.’

‘Well! we’ll try to make you so at Cloverfield. It is a bargain then? You will come with us?’

‘I would go with you all over the world.’



CHAPTER II.

‘A PLEASANT ENGLISH HOME.’

FOR the sake of Delia, Mrs. Hephzibah makes short work of settling up accounts with her London employers, and in another week the friends are on their way to Cloverfield. True to her principles of self-help, Mrs. Bond wished to journey to Hampshire alone, leaving her husband to follow at his own convenience. But the ‘little old man’ outwitted her. He packed up all his belongings at Hampstead with marvellous celerity, and was down at Cloverfield making all things ready

for her reception before she knew he had left town.

Delia thinks the circumstance pleases Mrs. Hephzibah more than it frets her.

‘After all, my dear,’ she observes, ‘the house is his own, and the man has a right to put it in order if he chooses to take the trouble. I dare say we shall have to do everything over again, but if it pleases him it is little matter.’

But when they reach the cottage at Cloverfield, even Mrs. Bond is obliged to confess there is nothing left for them to do. Traces of the ‘little old man’s’ affection and gallantry are visible upon every side, and Delia is astonished to see the comfort and luxury with which the new home is surrounded. She had expected to find a pretty rural cottage standing in its own little garden; but it is much more than that. It is a well-built, commodious dwelling, with a thatched roof

and low, over-hanging gables, and a verandah that runs round three sides of the house. Attached to it are fruit and flower gardens, with poultry-yard and stables, and a couple of paddocks for the accommodation of the ponies and the cow. Nothing is too large, nor too assuming about it, but everything is comfortable and well-planned. It is the picture of a pleasant English home—such middle-class homes as are to be found nowhere but in our own country.

Mr. Bond meets the ladies at the station, with a low carriage drawn by a couple of ponies, and has soon brought them across the wide common where the school-children are tumbling over each other in play, and through the pleasant village where the mothers hanging about their open doors in the cool of the evening salute them as they pass, into the drive which leads up to the door of the cottage, and which is bordered by beds of

shrubs and fringed with many-coloured flowers.

Delia does not converse much with the married couple on their way home. She is sitting behind and cannot see their faces. But she can mark the eagerness with which the little lawyer points out each object to his wife, and envies her friend for having found such a true companion with whom to pass the remainder of her days. Perhaps Mrs. Hephzibah also considers herself a subject for envy, for as she descends from the pony-carriage and enters the little hall of her new home, Delia thinks her eyes look rather moist, and is almost sure her lip is trembling. Anyway, when they find themselves alone in the bedrooms which have been dedicated to their use, Mrs. Hephzibah seems quite unable to bestir herself to get ready for the dinner that is waiting them below.

‘He is too good to me,’ she says in a low

voice, as she sits down by the dressing-table. 'I have not deserved it at his hands. No woman in the world is worthy of so much care, and forethought, and attention. O! Delia, with all our boasted courage, we are but feeble creatures after all, when a grain of kindness has the power to overcome us.'

'Dear Mrs. Hephzibah! I am sure you are worthy of it, and more too. You cannot think how rejoiced I am that you have come to this at last. You see I am right after all, and a happy marriage is the happiest condition in the world.'

But Mrs. Hephzibah has not yet arrived at the pitch of indulging in sentiment with her eyes open. It may overtake her, but it shall not be for want of the grinding heel of her practicality to keep it down.

'Delia Moray! you're talking nonsense again. Like all your sex, give you an inch and you take an ell. Don't suppose,

because I say that I have not deserved as much as this at William's hands, that I am therefore about to repay his benefits in the coin in which most women liquidate their debts of gratitude. Don't imagine for a moment, if you please, that because I have been such a fool as to marry when I ought to be stitching at my shroud and bargaining for the only piece of earth of which I shall ever be the freehold possessor, I am going to make myself a laughing-stock for society, by putting on the airs and graces of a silly young woman, and fancying that little Bond has done all this because he adores me. It's no such thing! The man has outlived all such folly long ago, and if he hadn't I should soon make him wish he had. We've entered into a contract, my dear—please don't lose sight of that in your connection with us—a contract to share such worldly goods as we may possess, and live in amity to our lives' end, if

we can. The world is so scandalous, and society is such a toadeater, that in order to carry out such an undertaking a woman is compelled to go through the farce of adopting a man's name, and so I have been transformed into Mrs. Bond ; but I don't acknowledge the justice of it any the more. My opinions on this subject are just the same as they ever were, and excepting that William and I have arrived at an age when we shall have no temptations to be fickle, I should expect no greater satisfaction from the arrangement than is derived by the majority of married people. However, we are good friends and desirous of pleasing each other, so perhaps we may rub on well enough ; but dismiss all idea from your mind that you'll see anything of what people call love-making pass between us, for I should despise myself only one degree less than you would despise me if such were the case.'

‘Dear Mrs. Bond! nothing could ever make me despise you—that less than all!’

‘Call me Mrs. Hephzibah, if you please, Delia. I have no intention of dropping my own name, I can tell you. I suppose servants and strangers will have to use the other; but the less I hear it the better I shall be pleased. And now, perhaps we had better go down to dinner, or the little old man will be fidgeting all the buttons of his waistcoat off, in his anxiety to know what has become of us.’

Delia sees the parlour-maid directing sly glances of astonishment at the appearance presented by her new mistress; but Mrs. Hephzibah sits at the head of her table in silent dignity, and with the most supreme indifference to the utter absence of adornment in her attire. No fancy ribbons nor laces soften the hard masculine outline of her dress. The severest of starched collars and

cuffs are the nearest approach to feminine decoration that she will admit ; and her grey hair, which is still abundant, is strained off her face and screwed up into a knot behind, without the least attempt to render her features more attractive.

Delia, seated by her side, looks far more like what the mistress of the establishment should be. Her dress, though simple enough, is made in the last fashion ; soft ruffles of lace encircle her white throat, and fall over her slender wrists ; her hair waves off her forehead, leaving sundry little tendrils of a warmer hue to cluster over her brows and make shadows for her earnest melancholy eyes.

She appears younger than she is by contrast with her friend, and no one looking at her could do else than pronounce her to be a very pretty woman ; yet Mr. Bond's eyes pass by her figure to rest with affectionate

admiration upon the one he has at last persuaded to take the head of his house for him. The little lawyer, not overstrong in the brain, perhaps, who has been knocking about the sea of social life for so many years companionless, can hardly credit his good fortune in having secured Mrs. Hephzibah Horton to be the guardian angel of the remainder of his life.

Everything will go smoothly now. All those little misunderstandings with Bob's underbred wife, which have fretted the poor old father more than he has cared to say, are over. He will have but to request Mrs. Bob to carry her complaints to Mrs. Bond, to be quite certain he will hear no more of them. Bill, too, will become more chary of making demands upon the parental purse to pay for the extravagances which his own receipts are unable to cover. Mr. Bond himself will no longer be tossed backwards

and forwards, like a shuttlecock, between the two sons, who seem to consider he was sent into the world simply to supply their need. They have known Mrs. Hephzibah from their childhood, and are quite aware she is not to be caught sleeping, so that their father feels he has gained a protector in her as well as a companion. Her brusque manner and uncouth appearance are music and beauty in his eyes, and no young lover who has just gained his bride could feel more devotion than Mr. Bond does, although he dares not show it.

The evening is spent in examining the premises. Delia would rather withdraw herself from the company of the newly-married couple, but Mrs. Hephzibah will not allow it. On the contrary, she passes her arm through that of her friend, and insists upon her walking by her side, whilst Mr. Bond trips behind them, or trots in front, but always

with the same benevolent aspect and happy, smiling countenance.

They visit the cosy, sweet-smelling stables, where the sleek ponies have just been littered down for the night in company with an old cob, Mr. Bond's especial property, which has followed him from Hampstead. Here, too, Mrs. Hephzibah recognises the old purblind setter, Beau, whom his master was too considerate to leave to the tender mercies of Bill and his expected wife, and the stableman and gardener, who used so often to pull his cap to her in the old homestead, and is only too pleased to repeat the process now to the mistress of the new.

The flower-garden is a picture of repose, with its wide velvet lawn protected by mulberry and beech trees, under the shade of which are invitingly placed benches and wicker chairs, and in the well-stocked fruit-garden beyond they find the trees in which

Mrs. Hephzibah had expressed the idea that she might be able to take an interest. The Alderney cow has been penned into her shed for the night, but she thrusts her soft wet nose over the bar to greet her new friends, and the poultry give evidence of their presence in the hen-house as the new-comers pass through the little yard that is dedicated to their use.

‘It’s all uncommonly pretty,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah to Delia.

‘It is all very, very pretty,’ she echoes with a sigh.

She is thinking how much she could have enjoyed such a residence as this had her lot been happier than it is. It is an entirely new phase of existence for her. In all her varied life it has never happened that she should be made acquainted with real country life. In her neglected childhood, spent in Irish poverty, and a dirty town—in her unnatural girlhood, passed upon the stage—her

blighted womanhood in the heart of London, and then her later better years in the city of Bruges, there has been much excitement and some pleasure, but not one taste of the pure unvitiated delights of rural life. She has never known what it is to take interest in animals and flowers, and such-like innocent amusements. The only pure happiness she has experienced was when she became a mother, and bore the child who is the cause of her present misery.

And to such people the first sight and taste of the country comes like a draught of pure water to a parched tongue. It almost intoxicates them, and yet it makes them feel so strong and healthy, as if they could never exist again away from the fresh, delicious air, and the sweet breaths of the flowers, and the soft notes of the birds, and all the other fragrant scents and murmuring music that congregate about a country house.

Mrs. Hephzibah is enjoying it all thoroughly. She is at liberty to do so. For her there are no miserable recollections to be put away, before even the blushing beauty of a rose can afford her any satisfaction.

Notwithstanding all her asseverations to the contrary, which are but dying struggles to maintain the independence for which she has fought so long, she becomes a perfect child in her enthusiasm over the roses with which the garden abounds, and gathers one after another until her hands are filled with a huge bouquet of every coloured sweet.

‘How lovely they are! How fresh! How beautiful, and what an exquisite scent!’ she keeps on exclaiming, as she buries her face in the flowers.

Is it a drop of dew remaining from last night’s shower, or a tear from Mrs. Hephzibah’s eye that lingers in the cup of

that damask rose? Who shall tell what thoughts rise up within her breast—still womanly, in spite of all her pretensions to the contrary—as she inhales the delicious fragrance of her new possessions, and remembers that for her, if she so chooses, life may henceforth be all roses!

No more drudgery, no more care or anxiety for the morrow, no more work in spite of pain or trouble or heart-sickness, but a peaceful and well-provided-for existence, gliding smoothly on to the confines of the other world, with time in it to rest and think and prepare for the change that is coming surely to us all.

Her girlhood, which should have bloomed like those roses, and been as free from care, was swallowed up in a necessity for work. Her real girlhood seems to have dawned but to-day—the time of love and protection has but just come. And the man who has

provided all this enjoyment for her, who has filled her hands with roses, is walking by her side, Delia having contrived to fall behind. In a moment Mrs. Hephzibah's heart strikes her with remorse that she should never yet have acknowledged to him the change his life has wrought in hers. In the dusk of the evening, and under the shadow of a falling acacia-tree, she draws nearer to him and grasps his hand.

'William,' she says hurriedly, and with much shame—'William! you have made me so happy.'

The little lawyer jumps with surprise and pleasure. That to be the husband of Mrs. Hephzibah was to have gained the summit of his ambition, he had known all along, but it had never struck him that their marriage would be an increase of happiness for her.

'Hephzibah,' he answers, in a voice that is slightly shaky, 'is it really true?'

‘It is true, and I don’t see why I should be ashamed to own it. I always thought that to marry was to give up everything that made life pleasant, but I find it is to receive everything instead. All the comforts and luxuries that surround this little home—I feel as if I should begin life anew in them—and you have planned them all for me! Well, then, in return I want to be honest, and tell you that you will have your reward. Already I feel ten years younger than I did, with all these sweet things about me; and if it were a little darker, William, I—I would kiss you!’

Had Mrs. Hephzibah said she would eat him, the little old man could not have been more surprised, but he is equal to the occasion. He stands on tiptoe then and there, and salutes her heartily, and the smothered laugh that reaches Delia from under the acacia-tree does not convey any meaning to

her of the impropriety that is being effected there. Only when Mrs. Hephzibah, with a slightly increased colour in her face, which greatly improves its appearance, calls to her that the dew is falling, and that they had better go in to the tea-table, she pleads fatigue as an excuse for seeking her own chamber.

In order that outward calm may have its full effect, the mind that receives it must be at peace. It may have passed through great trials, and be still bruised and bleeding from the torture it has undergone, but the storm is spent, and the blossoms of hope have been laid low, and there is the waste space left for the sowing of another crop. Delia's heart is still too much occupied with its loss. Quietude and rest afford her leisure for brooding — and brooding drives her mad. The bustle and turmoil of a theatre, and the clash of an orchestral band, would be better suited to her present frame of mind than

silence and solitude. As soon as ever she finds herself alone she unpacks her box and takes out her boy's photograph to weep over undisturbed. She is very, very glad for her old friend's good fortune, but it contrasts rather bitterly with her own ill-luck. What is her Angus doing at that moment? How does he think of her? What does he say? The unanswerable queries with which we delight to torture our wounded spirits rise up in succession before her—and all the reply is, silence! and must be for evermore.

She takes her boy's picture in her hand and sits by the open window, that she may cool her heated face and inflamed eyelids before retiring to rest. The harvest moon has risen, and is streaming down upon the pretty garden in a broad beam of light that turns the pink roses into grey, and the crimson into black. The shadows under the acacia-tree stretch across the lawn; not a

sound is to be heard from bird or bee ; not a leaf rustles. On everything is stamped the impress of sleep and rest.

Delia is just thinking how peaceful and content all nature lies, when she perceives two figures steal across the lawn. Is it possible that they can be those of Mr. and Mrs. Bond ? His arm is round her waist, whilst her hand rests confidently upon his shoulder.

‘Say it again,’ urges the little old man, in an earnest voice which would not have disgraced a wooer of twenty.

‘If it gives you pleasure, William, certainly. I feel very happy ! happier than I have ever felt in my life before.’

Delia softly withdraws from the open window, and retreats to the other end of the room. Be the speakers eighteen or eighty, we have no right to listen to the sacred confidences of love.

But as she disrobes herself, the tears fall quickly. What has she done to be of all the world so desolate? Even Mrs. Hephzibah, who has spent a lifetime in decrying marriage and the fools who embrace it, has found her mate at last, whilst she is doomed to solitude in order to make others happy. It seems all very hard to Delia just now. She cannot see the hand of Providence, and therefore she does not believe in it.

By-and-by the light will dawn, and she will forget the darkness she has passed through. But we all know how wearily the hours go when we are holding a vigil in the night.



CHAPTER III.

‘ YOU ARE A COUNTRYMAN OF MINE.’

HOWEVER miserable we may be, it is impossible, happily for ourselves and others, to keep up the appearance of gloom without intermission. We may have parted with the love of our life but yesterday. He has sailed for the other side of this world, perhaps, or for the other world itself, and his thoughts and works will be a mystery to us henceforward ; yet the prattle of a child has the power to make us smile, or the insolence of an inferior to call forth our anger. So it

is with Delia. She goes to sleep worn out with sighs and weeping—she wakes to the carol of the lark, the sound of the mower's scythe upon the lawn, the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle—all the bustle and stir, and fragrance of early morning in the fresh country, and rises more hopeful by expectation—the expectation of being of use in her generation, and increasing the happiness of a life that has never hesitated to use itself for her.

The cheerful faces that meet her at the breakfast-table tend to increase this feeling—so does an inspection of the little *ménage* that is to be placed under her care. Mrs. Bond's indoor household consists of three maid-servants, all of whom are to be completely under Delia's management. She is to take charge of the storeroom also, and order the meals—to be the housekeeper of the cottage, in fact ; and since no limit is placed

upon her expenditure, and nothing is required but on a very modest scale, she looks forward to her duties with pleasure. They are such as suit her.

Some women are born cooks, others are born dressmakers, others, again, are born nurses, or managers. Delia belongs to the third class. She does not care for the work itself, but the power to direct it well is a small ambition to her. So she enters zealously into a catechism of her maids, and to the arrangement of their duties and her own; she rallies her forces, in fact, and inspects her ammunition, and plans her mode of attack, and makes preparation for a long campaign.

Mrs. Hephzibah would be able to do all this for herself if she tried, but it would be a sore trouble to her, as great a one as it would be to her husband. A working literary life spoils a woman for the drudgery

of domestic management, which is an art in itself. If you have been used to concentrate your own thoughts upon your own work or that of others—to live an interior life in a far-away world that has nothing in common with the sphere you dwell in, it is very difficult to enter with real interest into the discussion of how much rice is required for a pudding, or how many hours the leg of mutton should hang before the fire. And by this I do not wish to intimate that I join the usual cry that a literary woman must needs be a slattern or an ill-manager. Education of the intellect does not make her less skilful to arrange her own affairs; on the contrary, it increases her capability for all sorts of work, but the two cannot run together with the attention that each deserves. A man is not expected to carry on his work at office, or on the Stock Exchange, and attend to his kitchen and nursery at the

same time ; and a woman can hardly be supposed to do more than a man, though she often does so. Mr. Bond, who has watched Mrs. Hephzibah through so many phases of her weary life, knows all this, and determined years ago that if she ever became his wife, it should be not to exchange one form of drudgery for another still less congenial to her, perhaps, but to rest both mind and body.

So, whilst Delia undertakes the labour, which is next to nothing when undertaken alone, of managing the household affairs, Mrs. Bond is to be allowed to sit in the pleasant little study allotted to her private use, and indulge in scribbling or reading, or anything that strikes her fancy ; whilst her husband takes long rides on his cob, or lingers about the garden and stable-yard directing his servants in their various employments.

According to the pleasant fashion of the countryside, they adopt the custom of early dinners, so that Delia's active duties are soon over, and she is at liberty to be Mrs. Hephzibah's companion for the rest of the day—a privilege her friend will never permit her to forego by locking herself up in her bedroom, for the purpose of unhealthily brooding over the inevitable. Then, in the pleasant afternoons, Mr. Bond will take both the ladies out driving into the lovely scenery surrounding them; or, if he should be tired by his morning's ride, Mrs. Hephzibah and Delia venture by themselves and become the subjects of many ludicrous *contretemps* in their endeavours to learn the art of directing the feet of those two sleek ponies in the way they should go.

On the whole, however, since they love the beautiful woods and dales through which they pass better than the mere act of loco-

motion, they get on pretty well ; and the afternoon drives, during which the friends can converse freely with each other, become a source of the greatest comfort to Delia, who derives strength and courage, and, above all, hope, from the teaching of a mind that is greater than her own.

Cloverfield, being still a mere village, has not many resident gentry beside the clergyman and doctor, and one or two solitary old maids and widows ; but it is surrounded by gentlemen's seats, the owners of which, after a while, commence to call upon Mr. and Mrs. Bond. At Delia's earnest request she is not asked to be present in the drawing-room during these visits of ceremony. She has several reasons for not wishing to make any new acquaintances, foremost amongst which is the dread of recognition, and though Mrs. Hephzibah will not admit the justice of the fear, she agrees to indulge it.

Delia is therefore rather surprised one afternoon when she has retired to her own room with a novel, to hear the parlourmaid at her door with a request from her mistress that she will go down to the drawing-room to see a gentleman who has just arrived.

‘Who is it, Sarah?’ cries Delia, her truant thoughts flying at once to the only gentleman she would have cared to see.

‘Mr. Le Mesurier, ma’am. I think he’s a parson—at least, he wears a long coat.’

‘Very good! I’ll be down directly.’

When she enters the room, flushed from the haste with which she has arranged her dress, she finds the servant’s surmise is correct.

‘Let me introduce to you my friend Mrs. Manners,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah; and then she continues to Delia, ‘I hope I have not disturbed you, my dear, but I thought it only right you should make the acquaintance

of our clergyman. Mr. Le Mesurier tells me that he has just returned from his annual holiday, and that the gentleman we have hitherto heard on Sundays has only been taking his duty during his absence.'

'I am very glad,' says Delia.

'Glad of what, Mrs. Manners?' asks the new-comer, with an accent that betrays his Irish nationality. 'That I have returned, or that Mr. Saunders only took my duty?'

'Of both, perhaps,' she replies, smiling; 'any way I hope it is not great treason to say that Mr. Saunders has sent me to sleep every time I tried to listen to him.'

'Let us be charitable and lay it on the weather, Mrs. Manners, which has been too hot to keep awake in under any circumstances. Do try and think it was the weather! Else, if you fall asleep again next Sunday, I shall have no loophole by which to flatter myself that my discourse has not

had a similar effect upon you to that of Mr. Saunders.'

He is a distinguished-looking man, tall and well-made, with an intellectual countenance, and wearing a tight cassock that shows off his fine figure to advantage. His blue eyes and dark hair are strongly Irish, so is his winning tongue. In a word, he impresses both his hearers favourably.

'I will retain judgment, then, until after next Sunday,' replies Delia, laughing; 'and especially since, if I am not mistaken, Mr. Le Mesurier, you are a countryman of mine, and should claim every indulgence at my hands.'

The moment the words have left her lips she regrets them, but it is too late. The warm partizanship of the natives of Ireland is well-known, and Mr. Le Mesurier embraces the idea of the connection between them.

'I guessed as much from your appearance.

Pray, Mrs. Manners, allow me to shake hands with you over again in token of our good-fellowship. It is a real delight to meet any one from the "ould counthry" down in these wilds. May I ask if it is long since you left it?

Then Delia sees still more plainly the trap she has laid for herself, and the complications to which it may lead. But there is no help for it at present.

'Very long! I have not seen it since I was a little child.'

'I thought so. You have no trace of the brogue left in your pronunciation. On the contrary, I detect a little French accent.'

'Perhaps so! I have lived abroad!'

'Ah! and do you not love it? For my part I could live there always. I have just come from the Tyrol. Every year I get away from these dull pastures for a month and rush to Switzerland. I feel as if I breathed

more freely and thought more freely there than in England. Have you been in the Tyrol ?

‘ I went there for a few weeks, some years ago, in the company of friends.’

‘ Where have you chiefly lived then when abroad ?’

Mr. Le Mesurier is putting all these questions with the enthusiasm of twenty, and Mrs. Hephzibah, seeing how awkward they are likely to become, makes an effort to rescue Delia from his clutches.

‘ My friend and I have not long returned from a visit to Flanders, Mr. Le Mesurier. I suppose you have visited Antwerp in your wanderings. In my opinion it is one of the most interesting of all old cities. Not a street nor a corner in it but contains some striking reminiscences of the past !’

‘ Ah ! forgive me, Mrs. Bond,’ exclaims Mr. Le Mesurier, with that ready frankness

which is the distinguishing charm of his countrymen, 'for having left you so long out of the conversation, but you do not know, perhaps, the delight that we Irish feel on meeting one another on what must ever be to us a foreign soil.'

'I can quite understand it, and there is no need to apologise. Only Mrs. Manners has been so long absent from her native country that I believe she has forgotten all about it.'

'Madam, you are not an Irishwoman—' ('No! thank the Lord!' interrupts Mrs. Hephzibah for her own benefit; 'a dirty, idle, story-telling lot.')—'or you would never have made that speech, charming as it was. An Irishwoman can never forget her country! I have not seen Dublin now for ten long years, but every stone in her streets is stamped upon my memory.'

'I wonder you don't go to Dublin then, instead of the Tyrol, when you get a holiday,

if you love it so much,' says Mrs. Hephzibah in her blunt manner.

Mr. Le Mesurier smiles sily.

'There are reasons, my dear Mrs. Bond. Friends, dead or gone—no home to receive me, and the price of everything extravagantly dear. No! I have not the means to appear in Dublin as I should wish to do. The Tyrol is cheaper, pleasanter, and a more complete change. Still I love my country and her people, and I trust that Mrs. Manners and I shall be very good friends.'

'Have you been long settled in Cloverfield, and are you a married man?' demands Mrs. Hephzibah, still trying to lure him away from a dangerous topic.

'I have been settled here ever since my ordination ten years ago, and I have no wife to share the vicarage,' he answers with a sudden gravity of manner.

‘I hope you are not one of those parsons who consider celibacy a duty.’

‘Yes, I do—decidedly. A duty to myself,’ he answers lightly. ‘What would become of my visits to Switzerland, if I had a wife and family to carry about with me?’

‘Well, some people consider that all parsons should be married men.’

‘I know they do, but I think it is very hard upon the parsons! Are we to marry to please our parishioners or ourselves? I believe the social rule is believed to hold good also with doctors, which is the reason you see so many clergymen and doctors married to fools or dowdies, and often to women their inferiors in birth. Their patients and parishioners say they *must* marry, and in desperation they take the first wife that comes to hand. It’s very unfair, isn’t it, Mrs. Manners? Why can’t

they leave us to please ourselves. We come to grief quite soon enough without their assistance.'

'You're evidently a Radical,' says Mrs. Bond, 'one of what are termed "muscular Christians" nowadays. Well, I don't know that I shall like you any the less for it, for if I hate one thing above another, it is the humbug of cant. And there's more of it in your profession than in any other.'

'I am afraid there is,' he answers gravely, 'but it is with us as it is with all. We are what the world makes us. You won't let us be natural. You think because we have been ordained, we mustn't be men, consequently it has become the fashion to prune our thoughts, and order our conversations so that the words shall run in the same groove until you can hardly distinguish one man's utterance from another. It is not *we* that speak—it is the automaton that custom has

manufactured for you. We have our passions, and our instincts, and our inclinations like others of the human race, but we are not permitted to indulge them, at least openly ; and when you catch one of us tripping, you cry out, " O ! what a horrible scandal ! what a false, wicked hypocrite he is ! " Whilst even if we talk, as I am talking to you now, giving free vent to the thoughts that rise in our hearts, it is animadverted upon as very strange conversation for a clergyman, and one that ought really to be reported to his bishop.'

' Well, you need never be afraid of speaking your mind here, Mr. Le Mesurier, because in the first place, it's what I think every intellectual and reasoning creature ought to do ; and in the second, I've always been a staunch advocate for liberty of conscience, and I don't mean to deny my principles under my own roof-tree.'

‘You give me more pleasure by your words than you can imagine, Mrs. Bond. Your literary reputation is not unknown to me, as doubtless you have guessed ; and here at last then I may hope to find friends and companions with reciprocity of feeling and sentiment.’

‘You have not found that yet in Cloverfield during ten years’ residence?’

He shrugs his shoulders.

‘Hardly! I have certain duties to perform in the village which must not be neglected, and leave me but little leisure to do more than keep up a formal acquaintance with the surrounding families. Then in the place itself, besides one or two single ladies whom I could not possibly visit without risking my reputation, so charitable are the remainder, there are Dr. Wilson and his wife. He is a man without an idea beyond the pills and potions he administers in his

twenty-mile circuit; and she—well, she is Mrs. Wilson, and the mother of ten children who have to be kept, fed, and educated on an income of three hundred a year. *Que voulez-vous?* Is it likely her intellect, if she ever had any, could survive such multifarious cares? No, Mrs. Bond, I have lived a very lonely, friendless life since coming to Cloverfield. You must be patient with me if I take advantage of your kind invitation to visit you oftener than perhaps you intended me to do.'

Mrs. Hephzibah smiles at the compliment. She has taken a fancy to the stranger. She detects talent in him, and a mind above the common. She likes the society of intellectual men, and she does not dream that in cordially giving him admission to look in at the cottage whenever his time and his inclination prompt him to do so, she is paving the way for difficulties in his path and that

of her friend. He sits with them for half the afternoon on that occasion, talking in the most fluent manner on every topic that is started, discussing the country and the town, literature and music, the Tyrol, the Vatican, the Alhambra, and the Louvre ; and proving himself to be not only a well-read man, but an excellent linguist and a clever traveller, who has made good use of his eyes and his wits as he journeyed through the world. The ladies are delighted with his conversation and charm of delivery.

The hours pass rapidly in his company, and before he takes his leave, Mrs. Hephzibah has made him promise to dine with them on the following day.

‘ I’m charmed with the man, my dear,’ she remarks to Delia as soon as Mr. Le Mesurier is out of hearing, ‘ and I want William to know him. He’s ever so much too good for a parson, for, as a rule, I can’t endure them ;

but it just shows how travel and society can enlarge the mind. If he had stuck down here all his time, he'd have been as stupid as the majority. But you made a decided slip, Delia. How came you to tell him you were Irish! He'll never let you alone about it now.'

'It was the stupidest mistake, but I really couldn't help it. I never thought of the consequences. But I hope it may rest there. You remember what you promised me, dear friend—that I should never be asked to join your circle when you had any strangers with you. You must let me claim that promise to-morrow, and dine up in my own room.'

'Delia! you are never going to be so childish!'

'I am indeed! Remember, I am only your housekeeper, and I must see that the dinner is properly served. Were you to

insist upon my appearing at table, I should only be miserable and ill at ease, fearing that each word I uttered might betray my history.'

'But William and I look upon you as a sister—or a daughter—and wish you in every respect to be treated as such.'

'I know you do, dear kind friends! and I shall never be able to repay your goodness to me. Then, if I am to be considered what you say, let me take a sister's privilege, and have my own way in this matter.'

'I can't refuse you if you put it on that score. But I am disappointed. However, child, do as you choose! Only I expect that the parson will be the most vexed of the three.'

'He is the very one I want to avoid,' cries Delia. 'There is something in that man—I cannot tell you what—that seems as if he would draw the whole of my secret from me at his will. O! Mrs. Hephzibah! keep me from Mr. Le Mesurier, I implore you!'

‘Goose!’ replies Mrs. Hephzibah curtly; but she does not think so, all the same. ‘There’s an influence in the parson that has power over me as well as Delia,’ she says to herself; ‘I suppose it’s magnetic force, or something of the sort, but any way he’s not one of the common herd, and he knows it for himself.’



CHAPTER IV.

‘ THEN YOU HAVE SUFFERED TOO.’

MRS. BOND is correct. On the following day the parson is decidedly the most vexed of the three at Delia's defalcation, although he is too polite to show it except by his anxious and somewhat wandering air. The little dinner is skilfully chosen and served, and his host and hostess are cordiality itself; still Mr. Le Mesurier's eyes keep roving each time the door is opened, and his ears are strained to catch the least sound from without. At last he ventures to hint at the subject that is disturbing him.

‘May I ask after the health of your charming friend, Mrs. Bond? I trust she is well.’

‘She is quite well, Mr. Le Mesurier; that is, she is the same as usual, but her health does not permit her to take late dinners.’

‘Then I trust the pleasure is only deferred, and that we shall see her in the evening.’

Mrs. Hephzibah does not reply. She believes that Delia has no intention of appearing at all. Her visitor continues:

‘I cannot explain to you what delight it was to me to meet a countrywoman in her. Her features remind me strongly of the Fergusson family. Was that her maiden name?’

‘No! nor do I think there is any connection between them.’

‘I used to know most of the Dublin families,’ proceeds Mr. Le Mesurier, with an intonation that infers he has no doubt he

knows that of Delia, if Mrs. Bond will only be good enough to disclose it. 'My father was a prebendary of the cathedral, and hand-in-glove with the best society. My mother and sisters live there still. Irish families, once settled in Dublin, don't care to leave it. It is their Paris, New York, and London, rolled into one. They think a great deal of Dublin.'

'So I have heard! Mr. Le Mesurier, will you allow me to give you a peach?'

'Thanks! And Mrs. Manners has lived on the Continent too. She carries the air with her. Forgive my egotism, but I always think an Irishwoman takes more readily to a foreign education than an Englishwoman. We have a great deal of southern blood in our composition, and the life and customs of France or Spain suit us almost as well as those of our native land.'

'Better sometimes, it would seem, as in

your own case,' replies Mrs. Hephzibah. She is getting tired of the conversation always drifting back to Delia, and would far rather discuss home or foreign politics with the parson than her friend's face and manners. 'I think I will leave you now to have a little talk with Mr. Bond, whilst I take a turn in the garden,' she says at last, rising from table; 'and don't trouble your head about joining me if you wish to make it a long one, for I never cared for the formality of etiquette whilst I lived in London, and am not likely to wish to carry it out in the depths of the country.'

Mr. Le Mesurier, holding open the door for his hostess with the grace of a *preux chevalier* of the olden school, assures her that the minutes will lag until they meet again; and she knows intuitively that it is Delia, and not herself, whom he desires to follow. Looking through the window, some ten minutes after,

the parson descries two female figures instead of one sauntering up and down in the dusk beneath the shadow of the trees, and astonishes his host by dropping the topic under discussion so suddenly, that Mr. Bond has no option but to suggest that if his guest will not take any more wine, they had better proceed to the garden and enjoy their coffee in the cool evening air. Mr. Le Mesurier accedes with alacrity, but when he reaches Mrs. Bond's side he finds that she is once more alone, whilst the three cups of coffee that are presently brought out to them on a tray by the parlour-maid, evidently prove that Mrs. Manners has no intention of joining them even in that simple refreshment. The fact is, Delia is afraid to meet the stranger again. She broke through her resolution in doing so at all, and the first time she opened her lips she committed a blunder which she does not know how to remedy. So she sits at her

open window instead, and listens to the ballads that, after the little party has come in from the garden, Mr. Le Mesurier trolls out in his rich baritone voice, accompanying himself on the cottage piano the while.

Delia is very fond of music. She is not a great proficient, but she is a great lover of the art, and sings her own little songs with a *verve* that has more power to charm than the finest execution in the world. She longs to be down in the drawing-room, taking her share in the entertainment now, for an enthusiast has as much pleasure in performing herself as in listening to the performance of others ; but false shame restrains her, and she keeps upstairs until she hears the final good-nights exchanged, and watches Mr. Le Mesurier's tall figure walk down the gravel drive, and turn, with a parting look at the cottage, in the direction of his own house. Consequent upon the failure of her

interview with the parson, however, Delia declines to make the acquaintance of the doctor's wife, who duly arrives to call upon the new residents, neither is she asked to do so; but when she hears Mrs. Hephzibah's account of the visit, she almost wishes she had been present.

'I've endured *such* a visitation!' exclaims that worthy as, the interview being ended, she enters Delia's bedroom. 'If I had broken every commandment in the Decalogue twenty times over, I should have expiated my crimes by the penance I've undergone this afternoon. You were well out of it.'

'Why! what was it all about?'

'It was about everything and nothing. The woman has told me the names, ages, and sexes of her ten children: the circumstances of their births; the dispositions they have developed, and the future their parents have mapped out for them.'

‘O! poor Mrs. Hephzibah!’

‘What have I done, Delia, to be marked out as the prey of the vulgar, low-minded wife of a country doctor?—I who all my life have determinately avoided every one who could possibly annoy or bore me with their coarseness or stupidity, even to the extent of being rude to them in return!’

‘Why! you have married Mr. Bond,’ says Delia, winding her arms about the uncouth person of her friend; ‘and you must expect to put up with a few disagreeables in exchange for all the peace and comfort you have gained.’

Mrs. Hephzibah colours. She is not yet accustomed to hear her marriage alluded to without a feeling of shame. She has lost caste by it in her own eyes, and there is many a moment at the present time when she would (or she fancies she would) undo it if she could.

‘Well! well! well!’ she answers testily, as she unwinds Delia’s clinging arms; ‘I suppose one must give and take in this world, but it is none the pleasanter. Any way, Mrs. Wilson doesn’t see the inside of my house too often! I’ll take good care of that! I’ll make William give up the cottage and take me back to London first!’

‘Is she so very disagreeable?’

‘She is everything that is odious. Uneducated, ill-mannered, common and unclean—with a narrowed, twopenny-halfpenny mind that takes the liveliest delight in scandal. She had nothing bad enough to say of Mr. Le Mesurier.’

‘What has he done to offend her?’

‘Heaven knows! Talked above her comprehension, most likely. Nothing stings these illiterate women so keenly as taking it for granted that they have received an education. She had nothing definite to tell, of course,

Scandalmongers live by insinuation. But her manner was most offensive.'

'Yet she does not accuse him of anything.'

'She says enough to make one believe she *could* accuse him of everything! She began by asking me if I knew him? I said, "Yes." Did I like him? "Yes," again. "O indeed! did I—well, of course different people had different tastes; but for her own part——" "Which put into plain English," I said, "means, I suppose, that you *don't* like him, though I am at a loss to perceive what concern that is of mine." "O! no! my dear madam," the cat went on, "don't think so for a moment. The doctor and I have both tried hard to make friends with Mr. Le Mesurier, and to shut our ears to all that is said about him; because, being a clergyman, of course we consider it our duty to stand up for him as much as lies in our power. Still one cannot always

be blind and deaf; and for a man in his sacred position, we are certainly grieved to see that he is so very careless in giving cause for scandal and ill-speaking amongst the people in the village.”

‘What a shame to take away a man’s character behind his back in that way! Did you ask her if she had any definite reason to speak so of him?’

‘Certainly not, my dear! It would only have been an extra pleasure to her to trump up a story against him if she hadn’t got one ready. But I said what I expect she did not like half so well. I told her that I thought it very superfluous and out of place for persons in the position of her husband and herself to talk about standing up “for a man of Mr. Le Mesurier’s rank and profession;” that from what I had seen of him I should consider him quite capable of fighting his own battles; and that if the people of Cloverfield spoke against

him, it was probably because he and his conversation were totally above their comprehension and themselves.'

'How I wish I had been there to hear you ! What did Mrs. Wilson say in return ?'

'She grew very red, and declared there were several most estimable and accomplished ladies in Cloverfield, who were quite capable of reaching Mr. Le Mesurier's standard. I said I was glad to hear it, and should be still more glad to see it. "But," the woman went on with a sniff, "they did not choose to associate with him after the strange stories that had been circulated about his former life, and the extraordinary manner in which he behaved for a clergyman : wearing a cassock about the village all day, smoking cigars, speaking in foreign languages, and deserting his duty to run off to the Continent whenever he had an opportunity." In fact, my dear, what I told the creature is true—Mr.

Le Mesurier is altogether beyond and above them, and they hate him in consequence." Mrs. Wilson began to excuse herself and talk some rubbish about undue influence, and a farmer's daughter, but I cut her short by telling her I had no time to listen to scandal, as it neither interested nor edified me. So she pretended the doctor wanted her at home, and scuffled out of the house, and I do not think she will put her foot into it again in a hurry.'

'I hope not! What an odious woman! Though I can quite imagine, Mrs. Hephzibah, Mr. Le Mesurier has had a history. There is a fund of melancholy in his eyes when silent, and his mirth strikes me as being somewhat forced.'

'Which of us has not had a history, Delia? I do not suppose the parson is immaculate, either in the past or the present, but he's an intellectual companion and a charming man,

and we have nothing to do with his private affairs. I saw Mrs. Wilson was dying to tell me about the farmer's daughter. As if I would stoop to listen to the tale of some low amour. Ladies who are so infinitely proper and virtuous that they cannot bring themselves to know a man against whom they have heard any evil report, have invariably minds coarse, and little enough, to delight in the fact. They will not bow to the sinner, but they rake up the dirt against him with both hands, and turn it over and revel in it. I do not mean to say that a parson shouldn't be a clean liver and perform the duties he has undertaken ; but if I should find out Mr. Le Mesurier to be all this woman has insinuated, it would make no difference to me. I might be sorry he had been injudicious enough to become a parson ; but I consider I have no right to pry into the private life of my friend.'

‘Few women are so just and generous as you are, Mrs. Hephzibah.’

‘Perhaps there is a spice of obstinacy mixed up with it, my dear. Anyway, what I have heard to-day has prejudiced me still more strongly in Mr. Le Mesurier’s favour, and I shall make him as welcome as I can to the cottage, in order to try and atone to him in some measure for the barbarians by whom he is surrounded. Poor man! No wonder he said he was friendless here. What must such a mind as his have suffered by contact with them!’

Mr. Le Mesurier is not backward in availing himself of the general invitation which Mrs. Hephzibah stops her pony-chaise in order to extend to him, the very first time they meet after the conversation that has been recorded.

Delia is seated by her side, and Mr. Le Mesurier glances to see if she seconds the offer of her friend. But she is looking away from

him over the surrounding country the while, and does not perceive the action. He accepts the invitation with alacrity, and takes advantage of it on the very next day, and several days following that ; but though he enjoys many interesting conversations with Mrs. Bond, he finds it more difficult to get hold of her companion, who always manages to slip away just before or after he makes his appearance. One day, however, Delia is fairly caught. The Bonds have gone out driving together, and she is superintending the stripping of some fruit trees for them, and cannot with honour leave the field of action ; when Mr. Le Mesurier, with the familiarity which is becoming habitual to him, walks through the open French windows of the cottage drawing-room and out upon the lawn.

‘ How glad I am that I have found you at last, and that you cannot run away from me,’

he commences, as he perceives her occupation. 'You have been so pertinacious in avoiding my society lately, that I had really began to think that I had offended you.'

'O! no!' replies Delia, with the old feeling of discomfort, she cannot tell why, at the first glance of his searching eyes; 'how could you possibly have done that? But you must not forget that I am only Mrs. Bond's housekeeper, and have a hundred little domestic duties to perform, that prevent my constant attendance in the drawing-room.'

'I suppose if you tell me so, Mrs. Manners, I am bound to believe it; but I protest against the "only." A woman of your talents and education may accept such a position from choice, but need never do so from necessity.'

'Anyway,' says Delia, with the tears in her eyes, 'Mrs. Bond has been my best and dearest friend through life, and I would rather be her housekeeper than the intimate

companion of the greatest lady in the land.

‘Ah! now we approach a different phase of the subject, and I can well believe in the sincerity and justice of your choice. And she repays your affection in full measure!’

‘God bless her! I know she does.’

‘Only, with myself, she would be better pleased to see you try and live down the troubles of the past, than nurse them in solitude and silence.’

‘Has she been speaking to you about me, then?’ demands his companion quickly.

‘Certainly not! Not a word has ever passed her lips on the subject, except an occasional one of praise for the pleasure she derives in your company, and which has made me anxious to enjoy a little more of it!’

‘How do you know, then, that I have

had trouble?' says Delia, with anxious eyes.

'My dear Mrs. Manners! How do I know that more than half the world has trouble? A physical doctor can tell by the look of his patient whether he suffers or no! Shall a mental doctor be less skilful? Believe me I have not been a close student of human nature for twenty years without learning something of the human heart. And since it is my privilege and my province to help to heal such as are wounded, I have no hesitation in offering my services whenever they may be required.'

'You cannot help me, Mr. Le Mesurier.'

'Is your hurt beyond all assistance, then?'

'Yes.'

The servants are surrounding them with large baskets of apples and pears to be examined before they are conveyed to the

storehouse and for a moment he drops the conversation. When he resumes it, it appears to be on a totally different topic.

‘Have you ever read the Works of Chateaubriand?’

‘I think not!’

‘I have here one of his most poetical tales, that of “Chactas and Atala.” I brought it to lend to Mrs. Bond. It may also interest you to read—that is if you like romance? But I must warn you that it is very melancholy.’

‘It cannot be much more melancholy——’
commences Delia; and there pauses.

‘Than your life, you were going to say,’ continues Mr. Le Mesurier quietly. ‘Perhaps not, and even if it were, you would not in all probability be able to perceive it; for our own griefs are always the worst in the world to us. You have not been much in the habit, I expect, of visiting your fellow-

creatures, Mrs. Manners? I don't mean the grandees, nor even those in your own station of life, but the poor?'

'No! I have never had the opportunity of doing so.'

'I thought not! Educated people consider it etiquette to keep their troubles to themselves. It is the poor only that find no shame in pouring forth their woes to the first sympathising ear that will listen to them. And the catalogue they have to give you, Mrs. Manners!—the pains they suffer uncomplainingly—the separations they have to endure—the friends they lay in the grave from sheer want of the means of keeping them alive—these and a host of similar martyrdoms meet the visitor of the poor on every side.'

'Have you many poor in Cloverfield?'

'We have no cases of positive starvation, but every other sort of suffering is rife.'

It is a mistake to suppose that paupers in the country are so much better off than their fellow-labourers in town. They have fresh air, it is true, and as a rule far too much of it. The old ones are racked with cramp and rheumatism, and yet have to toil on summer and winter to the very last. You will see old men of seventy and eighty here, breaking stones upon the road. And when at last they take to their beds, they are left alone, day after day, to live or die as God may see fit. Nothing has made me more satisfied to suffer, than viewing the sufferings of the poor.'

'Then you have suffered, too?' says Delia, in a low voice.

'I have!'

The words are few and simple, but it seems as though Mr. Le Mesurier could not trust himself, for the first moment, to say more. Then he goes on in a brisker voice :

‘Come, Mrs. Manners! I will make a clean breast to you, and that may, perhaps, encourage you to open your heart to me! Do not think me impertinent. I am speaking, remember, as your clergyman, and with the sole view of doing you good. You ask if I have suffered. Heaven knows I have! I started in life with a blot upon my name which follows me wherever I go. Not a real blot, mind you! although doubtless I was to blame as well as others, but a cruel misfortune which could not be fully explained, and of which I shall bear the brunt to my dying day. It involved the loss of all that I most loved, so that I have been a solitary and companionless man ever since, and it left me with an unsatisfied ache and longing which I know will never be set right. My parishioners blame me, I believe, for seeking distraction once a year in other scenes; if they knew what I endure during

the remainder of the term, pent up in this little place, with no excitement but such as the performance of my duties brings, they would pity instead of condemn me. I tell you truly, Mrs. Manners, if it had not been for viewing and entering into the troubles of my poorer brethren, I do not think I could have stood it all so long. But I visit them in their cottages, and on their sick-beds, and we read and pray together, and talk over the rest that is coming for all of us, and so we comfort one another, and gain fresh strength to labour on a little longer and be patient. There is one old widow, a Mrs. Bunn—I wish you could hear her talk. Poor soul! she has just parted with her only son, who has taken his family to America. Of course they will never meet again in this world, and she knows it. The separation is for life, and he is the last hope she had left, yet her resignation and cheerfulness, although

she suffers bitterly, are beautiful to see. She told me this morning—but, Mrs. Manners, what is this? Pray forgive me if I have said anything to wound you!’

For they have sauntered away together under the lime and acacia trees during the latter part of the conversation, and Delia, not being proof against the recital of a case so similar to her own, has suddenly broken down, and is crying bitterly.

‘O! Mr. Le Mesurier!’ she exclaims, ‘you are a good man! and you know what trouble is. I will tell you all! I will see if you can help me—if you can advise me what to do!’

And thereupon she leads him into the drawing-room, and confides the story, which we all know, to his sympathetic ears.

Mr. Le Mesurier listens in silence. The tale is all the sadder, because the woman before him has brought the misfortune on her

own head, yet he does not seem to think the case so hopeless as she does.

‘Surely, surely,’ he says, as she looks up into his face for comfort, ‘this separation cannot last for ever. Your son himself will see the injustice of it, and seek you out again. Do you suppose that the love of twenty-one years can be forgotten in a moment?—you wrong yourself and him by such a supposition! He may find consolation at first in the society of his bride, but as years pass on, and troubles come upon him, his heart and memory will turn back to his mother, and he will not be satisfied until he has met her again.’

‘Do you really think so?’ cries Delia, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

But a moment afterwards the sparkle fades,

‘You forget, Mr. Le Mesurier, that Angus will only gain his wife on the condition of

his never seeing me again. And then, when they are respectably settled, with a family perhaps, and young girls growing up to maidenhood—(O! my boy! my boy! shall I never nurse your children on my knee?)—that would not be the time to unsettle all his prospects by raking up the miserable story that almost blighted his youth! O! no! believe me that we are parted for ever! I meant it to be so, and it is done. But it is none the less hard to bear, and since I have seen you, I have felt, somehow, as if I should have no comfort in my church, or my prayers, until I had disburthened my heart to you. For I know that you will respect my secret.'

'Rest assured of that! I only wish that I could see my way to helping you more effectually than I do. But so long as you preserve your incognita, I fear it will be impossible!'

‘I will never give it up, Mr. Le Mesurier. If Angus could trace me to Cloverfield he might feel bound to do from duty what he would never do from inclination. He loves Gabrielle de Blois, and she loves him! What mother has ever been dearer to her son than his promised bride? He cannot have us both! Then I must be the one to resign my pretensions to him, for had it not been for me, this threatened shame could never have fallen on his life.’

Mr. Le Mesurier is too wise to pursue the subject further. He has already conceived a great desire to help this woman, but he must think the matter over when he is at home and alone. He does not want Delia to work herself up into a more hysterical condition than she is at present; so he will not allow her to talk any more about herself.

‘I think those people out there,’ he says, alluding to the fruit-gatherers, ‘appear as

though they needed your attention. Shall we go and look after them? I shall not forget one word of what you have told me, but we shall do no good by discussing it any more at present, and the fresh air will be better for you than this close room.'

So saying he saunters out upon the lawn again, where Delia, having dried her eyes, feels bound after a while to join him.

'Mrs. Manners, I have a favour to ask of you,' he commences, as soon as the opportunity occurs.

'What is it, Mr. Le Mesurier?'

'Will you help me in my parish work? I have often longed for a woman to co-operate with me, and take some of the more delicate cases off my hands, but no one would undertake the duty, and indeed I must say it is not to every one that I would confide it.'

'Do you mean, to visit the poor for you?'

‘I do ! Not only to visit, but to sympathise and pray for them.’

‘Mr. Le Mesurier, I am not fitted for so great a work. I can scarcely pray for myself.’

‘Then let the sight of their patience teach you to pray, and to give thanks. I will not have you say that you are unfitted for the office of consolatrix. You have suffered, and you acknowledge that you have sinned. Everybody is eager to affirm the first, but few can be found to confess the second. Armed with them both, you possess the right weapons with which to carry on your warfare with the hardships of the poor. Take my word for it, that you will derive as much healing from the occupation yourself as you will ever be able to impart.’

‘If Mrs. Bond can spare me, I shall be very glad to help you, Mr. Le Mesurier. Poor souls ! It would give me pleasure to

comfort them, and I feel that I could speak more freely with them, perhaps, than with the rich.'

'That is what every one says who has once tried it. It is one of those cases in which it is truly more blessed to give than to receive. And as for dear good Mrs. Bond, trust me for gaining her permission for anything that is likely to do you good. Come! I like to see that smile. It is the thought of my poor that has called it there. It is Heaven's first pledge of the reward which charity never fails to bestow on those who practise it.'



CHAPTER V.

‘HE IS NOT A NATIVE OF CLOVERFIELD.’

OF course, as Mr. Le Mesurier predicted, Mrs. Hephzibah is only too glad that Delia should take up any occupation that is likely to distract her mind from her own troubles. She loves the woman for herself alone, and has done so from the beginning of their acquaintance. She considers her the most foolishly romantic, sentimental and self-sacrificing individual in the world, but at the same time she respects her for the display of the very qualities she professes to despise as weakness.

In reality the two natures are not dissimilar, Mrs. Hephzibah being much softer than she gives herself credit for, and Delia capable, under the appearance of meekness, of the most heroic bravery. So the friends' minds grow together, although they seldom confess it openly, and Mrs. Bond heartily seconds the clergyman's demand on an occasional few hours of Mrs. Manners' time.

'Go! my dear, by all means,' she says to Delia, 'and help the poor creature to get through his duty. I thought he had got more than he bargained for, with this village full of bedridden paupers. It's not the sort of work I should fancy myself, you know. Snuffy old men and rheumatic old women are not much in my line, and I always hated reading aloud; but if you like it, and they like it, it will be all right; and as for the time, it's your own to do as you will with.'

‘You malign yourself, dear friend. Who was it picked up a half-starved little actress once in a stationer’s shop, and befriended her before she had even inquired whether she were deserving or otherwise? You have always been the helper of the poor and the distressed, and *I* know your charity is not worn out yet, whatever you may say of yourself.’

‘Well, well, child! there’s no charity in thrusting in an oar where none is required, and the Cloverfield paupers would probably recognise nothing but harshness in my voice and manner. They’ll have a good exchange in your soft wheedling tones and pretty little ways. So go along with your handsome parson and leave me to look after my ugly old man at home.’

Delia does not quite know how to take Mrs. Hephzibah’s interpretation of her attempts at being useful in the parish.

‘If I went *with* Mr. Le Mesurier,’ she answers gravely, ‘I should frustrate the sole object of my taking up this work, which is to lighten his duty by sharing it. He intends to give me, I believe, a certain number of cottages as my field of labour, and I am just to make friends with their occupants, and report their wants and wishes to him.’

‘All right, my dear ; set about it in any way you think best. Please yourself and you’ll please me. And as for the sick and the old, why, there’s the storeroom and the kitchen you know, Delia, and you must use them both as you find it necessary. We are not exactly Rothschilds, but that is no reason that the poor should want at our very doors, whilst we have a good dinner on the table ; and I am sure that William and I have but one mind in that respect.’

‘But, dear Mrs. Hephzibah, thanks to

your generosity, I have more money than I need for my own use; and if I make no sacrifice at all in this matter, I shall feel as if it would never bring a blessing with it.'

'Oh! I see what you're at—I knew what would come of your living amongst a lot of papists so long. You're half a papist yourself. You fancy that if you make yourself very uncomfortable, both in body and mind, for the sake of these wretched paupers, that the Almighty will reward you by a special providence. It's for your own good then, and not for the poor after all. Go along with you, Delia; I'm ashamed of you.'

The tears rise in Delia's eyes at this rough treatment of Mrs. Hephzibah's, but they flash nevertheless.

'You are unjust,' she says, 'and that is very unlike you. And I will not hear a word said against papists, as you choose to

call them ; for my best friends belong to that faith, and I should be an ingrate were I to stand by and hear it ridiculed in silence.'

Mrs. Bond laughs heartily at the discomfiture she has excited.

'That's right, little woman,' she replies, in a patronising tone ; 'stick up for your friends whatever they are. And I won't question your motives again. Even if you think as I say, I dare say you are right, and good deeds done at the expense of our own comfort bring a reward with them.'

'Mr. Le Mesurier says so,' remarks Delia softly.

'Be off then, and earn your blessing as quickly as you can.'

'The blessing she is most likely to earn,' continues Mrs. Hephzibah in confidence to herself, as soon as Delia's back is turned, 'is that good-looking parson. I'd stake my life

that he proposes to her before the month is out. Of course, what else could one expect? Given, a handsome educated man, and a pretty, fascinating woman, both free to do as they choose, and bent on the same occupation, there is no help for them. They *must* fall in love with each other. I wish, though, that that Austrian fellow with the red beard were out of the way. I'm afraid if Delia has cast her eye upon him, that the parson won't stand so good a chance with her. And it would be so charming to have her settled at the Cloverfield Vicarage and always within call. I tremble to think what the place would be like if anything should occur to make her leave me shut up all alone with this stupid old man. And to think that I've bound myself, body and soul, to be at his beck and call for the rest of my life! No more jaunts abroad at a moment's notice; no more restaurant dinners, without a soul to

please but myself—no more liberty, nor freedom, nor pleasure——’

Her thoughts are running on at railroad pace, when something stops them. Something that whispers :

‘ No more lonely hours in which to brood over your solitary life ; no more returning to an empty house devoid of welcome ; no more fear lest sickness should place you in the hands of a hireling, or death come unawares to find you friendless and alone.’

And Mrs. Hephzibah awakes from her fit of musing, to walk straight into the ‘stupid old man’s’ private sitting-room ; where he is much astonished to receive two resounding smacks upon his healthy old face, as earnest of his wife’s arrival.

Yes ! there are worse things in this world than the bondage that ties us to the heart, even of a friend.

Delia, innocent of the matrimonial designs

Mrs. Bond has in store for her, makes her first entry into the cottages which have been allotted to her care, with some degree of *éclat*. It is not everybody who can get on with the poor. It requires more than a desire to do them good to be able to effect it. Delia possesses the essentials of a very sweet voice and affable manner that make her appear even more interested than she is when discussing matters that do not concern herself. She will not carry tracts nor Bibles nor any of the formula of parish visiting in her hand. But she takes one or two old illustrated papers from Mrs. Hephzibah's drawer, and a few roses out of the cottage garden. She will not enter the houses without knocking, but stands on the threshold until she has received permission to enter.

The old people and the children stare at her at first with the uncouth breeding of the lower orders, but although she is so unused

to their society, she makes them feel at home with her at once. Her secret is a simple one. She treats them as though they belonged to her own rank of life, and takes no liberty with them that she would be ashamed to do with ladies and gentlemen. The poor are very suspicious of the higher classes. They are painfully aware of their own deficiencies and the superiority of gentlepeople, and they are sensitive of the impression their ragged clothes and dirty bodies and uncombed hair must make upon minds of greater refinement. The feeling causes them to be shy, and shyness makes them rude. Delia carries on her mission no knowledge of their ways and manners: only her own intuitive sense of delicacy and courteous bearing. Even the old men and women, who commence by thinking the lady from the Cottage has 'no call' to pry into their domestic concerns,

soon perceive the charm of her manner as she begins to talk, not of their poverty nor ailments, but of the beautiful country they have round Cloverfield, and the prospect of a good harvest and a fine autumn. Then when one old man admires the rose in her hand, she fastens it into the button-hole of his velveteen coat, while his wife exclaims, 'Theer now, feyther, ye air bucked up;' and with another she looks over the illustrated papers, and speaks to him of the foreign places depicted in them. So that even on that first day, she receives many a cordial invitation to return soon, and has engaged herself to read the news, once a week, to such of her new friends as may be active enough to assemble in one place to listen to it.

Mr. Le Mesurier laughs loudly when she reports her early efforts to establish a club in Cloverfield, and how it has set her think-

ing that if he can procure her a vacant room for the purpose, she might add to the pleasure by giving the old people tea or coffee, and permitting them to smoke while she reads to them.

‘We shall have you setting up a “free-and-easy” next, Mrs. Manners, and presiding at the piano and the bar yourself. What a dreadful mistake I have made by setting you, with all these loose continental notions in your head, to run riot amongst my innocent parishioners! What shall we call the “free-and-easy?” It must have a name and a sign, you know! And are the old ladies to be admitted as well as their husbands? Because if they get tea, their “masters” will certainly expect a little beer, if only to prove their superiority of sex. I must try and get up a comic song or two in anticipation of the opening night. Let me see, I used to sing “The Cork Leg” when I was a youngster,

but perhaps you will consider that too slow and old-fashioned for the delectation of a club under the auspices of so spirited a manager as you bid fair to be.'

Delia does not join in Mr. Le Mesurier's mirth, but takes all his remarks in earnest.

'I don't see why they should not have a piano, by-and-by,' she answers, 'or that I, or any other lady, should not sing and play to them occasionally. Poor old creatures! they have very few amusements. Then as to the beer! Would it harm them? They would only have it once a week, perhaps; and I know Mrs. Bond would supply it for them with pleasure. We would limit them you know, Mr. Le Mesurier! we would not let them take too much. And it would be such a treat to them. Such a thing to look forward to. A little news and music—a little chat about it all, and then their pinch of snuff or tobacco—their cup of tea or glass

of beer, just to take them home again. Surely it would all be very innocent and inexpensive. And with so many rich county families living round about, it should be easily done.'

'Every one is not so eager to procure pleasure for others, Mrs. Manners, as you seem to be, else this world would be a very different place from what it is at present. What you say is very true. Kept within bounds, such a club would be a godsend in this or any village. The difficulty would be, to keep it within bounds.'

'You have no objection to my reading the papers to the old people once a week, have you ?'

'I can have no objection to your carrying out any proposition that emanates from so kind and good a heart as your own. Have you been able to make anything out of old Strother ?'

‘Not yet. He would not even look at me, far less speak. But I hope that may not last. Is he as surly with you?’

‘Far worse! He has taken a hatred, or fear, of me—I cannot tell why—which has prevented my visiting him for a long time. I am afraid he is not a very amiable old person. I wish he had never come here.’

‘He is not a native of Cloverfield, then?’

‘Oh, no! He is a Scotchman, the father of Mrs. Kennett, who died many years ago. His daughter undertook the charge of him when he became a widower. I consider the old man to be quite mad, and advised Kennett to place him in the county asylum; but it seems that he promised his wife upon her death-bed not to do so. So he will be saddled with his support as long as he lives, which must be very inconvenient, as he requires constant watching.’

‘His granddaughter, Patsy Kennett, com-

plained bitterly to me the other day of the confinement it entailed on her.'

'Poor Patsy! Yes, she is a fine girl,' replies Mr. Le Mesurier, with a slight increase of colour.

'She appears devoted to you.'

'It is all fancy, I assure you. She suffered terribly from neuralgia a short time since, and I was foolish enough to try if mesmerism would relieve her. The attempt was successful, but the natives do not understand the meaning nor the effect of such a cure, and I had great reason to regret having used it.'

'In what way?'

'It attracted my patient too much towards me, and my motives and actions were altogether misinterpreted. That is one reason that I seldom cross Kennett's threshold now unless I am obliged to do so.'

'You are a practised mesmerist, then?'

'Yes, yes. But pray don't speak of it!'

The subject is an unpleasant one to me, and I would rather not discuss it. Shall you see old Strother to-day ?

‘ No ; I cannot go into the village again until to-morrow afternoon, and then I shall be at the other end. I do not think I shall find my way up to Kennett’s farm until Monday.’

‘ Monday will be the day of the school-feast, when I had hoped to have had your assistance in the field.’

‘ If you will excuse me, I would rather not be present. Mrs. Bond intends to be there, I know, with a sackful of toys and sugar-plums ; but I cannot play at children’s games, and shall be more usefully employed elsewhere.’

‘ The scene will be too gay to suit you ?’

‘ That is just what I mean.’

‘ And therefore you ought to come. I know it is far more painful when we feel sad

to attend a merry-making than a funeral; but we are taught not to live for ourselves, but others.'

'Must I be present at the feast, then?'

'No; I will let you off this time; but I am not sure if I shall not impose some penance for your want of courage that you will like less. For my own part, I would rather be with the children than with old Strother; but there is no accounting for tastes.'

Mrs. Hephzibah is made the recipient of some of the parson's grumbling at Delia's choice, and puts it down to the fact that her prophecy is coming true. Mr. Le Mesurier is evidently beginning to fret without Delia, and Delia is becoming afraid of herself and of him.

Now, there is some truth in the latter assertion, though not for the reason that Mrs. Bond imagines. Delia is not afraid of the influence her new friend possesses over her,

but she *is* of the jests, though innocent enough in themselves, that Mrs. Hephzibah makes about it. Mr. Le Mesurier and she stand in the position of single people, and cannot be too careful of the rumours which an intimacy between them might raise. That the clergyman *does* possess influence over her, Delia cannot deny. She felt it the first day they met, and subsequently, when that strange mesmeric power of his drew her secret from her unawares. She acknowledges, too, the great charm of his speech and manner, and which she has been able to enjoy to its fullest extent, for the plain reason that he has never permitted it to exceed the bounds of friendship, even by a look.

Were he to do so, she feels their acquaintance would be, once and for ever, at an end.

She has given up Gustave Saxe, but she

cannot forget him, nor that he wished her to be his wife ; and the honour which that desire bestowed on her will preclude her lowering herself by bestowing a thought upon any other man until the day of her death. Yet Mrs. Hephzibah's jokes and insinuations are trying, and prevent her seeking Mr. Le Mesurier's company as much as she might otherwise have done.

In the matter of the school-feast, she is determined not to be associated with him, because the affair itself is so entirely out of her line, that her friends will of necessity think she has taken part in it with the simple intention of pleasing him. So she remains firm in her refusal ; and on Monday afternoon, when the tent is pitched, and the flags are flying, and the village band is making most discordant music in the vicar's field, and the school children, with their tin mugs hung round their necks, are marching two-

and two up his laurelled drive, Delia is half a mile away, toiling along the lane that leads to Mr. Kennett's farm.

As she enters the long, narrow garden that fronts the house, she becomes aware of loud voices engaged in altercation and making themselves very audible through the open window.

'Now then, Patsy!' exclaims Farmer Kennett, 'off with all that fal-lal finery, and sit down to your work agen, as I tell ye. Why, where wad ye be runnin' to at this time o' the arternoon?'

'I'se a going to the school-feast, be sure,' replies the girl.

'Aye! I guessed as much. A follerin' the parson agen! A bleatin' arter 'im like an unweaned lamb! Now, I tell ye, once for all, I won't have it! There's the old man's meals to be got, and he to be looked arter! and the parson may go to blazes

before you shall neglect your proper work to run arter him! We've had enough o' that already, tell ye.'

'I don't see it's my place to attend to the old hunks. There's plenty of servants about the place.'

'Aye, sure! "Old hunks!" That's because he don't take to parson. And is *that* the way to speak of your own grandfeyther, that you ought to be proud to wait on?'

'Well, then, I ain't proud, and there's an end of it! Who would be proud to run about like a dog, and get no thanks arter all? Wish he'd stayed in Berwick, I do! A snarlin', growlin', cross-grained old——'

'Now, then, Patsy Kennett, you stop that tongue of yourn. I won't have the old man abused by you. If he's got his fads, so have the rest of us; and he was your mother's feyther—that's eno' for me.'

‘Mr. Kennett,’ exclaims Delia, unwilling to hear any more of the conversation without making her presence known, ‘is Mr. Strother indoors to-day?’

‘Sure, ma’am. I was just having a talk with Patsy aboot him as ye came up.’

‘And how is he?’

‘Much the same as usual, ma’am. He’s well enough in body; but he do fret arter his own place, sure-ly.’

‘And how are you, Patsy?’

‘I’s well enough, ma’am, thank ye!’

‘She’s put out because I can’t spare her to the school-feast, and leave the old gentleman to himself all the arternoon, ma’am. But I must be off to my field-work, and it’s hard lines to leave a poor old crittur like that to his own thoughts for so many hours at a time—now ain’t it?’

‘But can’t I relieve Patsy for an hour or two, Mr. Kennett? I do not care about the

school-feast; and if you will let her go, I will stay here and try and amuse Mr. Strother till she returns.'

'I'm sure it's main good of you, ma'am, to offer it, and if it won't be puttin' too much upon ye——'

'Certainly not. It is all the same to me if I stay here or go on to see some one else. And I wish to get better acquainted, if I can, with your father-in-law. I think I could amuse him if he would let me do so.'

'He's main cranky at times, ma'am, but there's no saying what kindness may do with him. Patsy's a deal too rough, as I allays say.'

'Feyther don't half know how trying he is,' whispers Patsy as she conducts Delia upstairs; 'he sits on that bed day and night, and don't let no one touch it—not even to smooth the clothes. And he talks sich

rubbish sometimes, it would curdle your blood to hear him.'

'He is not dangerous, is he, Patsy?'

'Bless ye! no, ma'am! only silly like, and obstinate. I'm sure I'm ever so much obliged to you for taking a turn with him, for I'm fairly tired out with his cranks.'

'Well, enjoy yourself as much as you can at the feast, Patsy, and come home again without fail in two hours.'

Mr. Strother does not look a promising subject with whom to beguile the tedium of an afternoon in August. He is a little old man of seventy-five or eighty; bent and decrepit to a degree, with cunning bleared eyes and a perpetual cough.

He is always to be found sitting crumpled up on the edge of his bed, from which it is difficult to move him at any time, and never

without he carries a huge parcel (of which he has never been known to lose sight) under his arm.

This parcel, which is hard and sewn up in half-a-dozen different wrappers of sail-cloth, oil-cloth, and baize, is said by some to contain all his personal wardrobe ; by others a deal box filled with stones ; others, again, assert that it is only a quantity of wood piled up into that shape ; but every one agrees that the precious packet is full of utter rubbish. Of course there are to be found a few suspicious and scandalous subjects who shake their heads at one another when old Strother's mysterious bundle is mentioned, and rake up stories of human bones and cut-up carcasses having been discovered, after years of concealment, packed in similar contrivances ; but the general opinion acquits the poor old man of anything worse than an unpleasant temper, an

enfeebled brain, and the cunning that usually accompanies it.

Delia, for her part, respects the bundle prodigiously ; Mr. Le Mesurier gave her a shocking account of his having once attempted, in jest, to get it away from the old man, the result being that Strother nearly had a fit, and hated the sight of the parson ever afterwards. So she enters the room with her usual winning smile and salutes the old man graciously. Patsy Kennett, who has accompanied her upstairs, attempts to explain her presence.

‘ This lady is good enough to say she’ll sit along o’ ye while I go to the school-feast, grandfeyther !’

‘ Aye ! aye ! but I don’t need her.’

‘ You need some one to talk to ye, and keep ye company ! ye’ll be civil now, grandfeyther, and give the lady good-mornin’, won’t ye ?’

‘I tell ye I don’t want her, nor none sich. Tell her to go home—theer’s no call for ’er here.’

‘She’ll sit along o’ ye all the same, and you mustn’t be sassy or you and I’ll fall out together soon as I come back.’

To this the old man makes no answer, but looks determinately obstinate and unpleasant.

‘I don’t half like to leave ye along o’ sich a cross-grained old mortal,’ says Patsy meditatively.

‘Never mind me, Patsy! If he refuses to talk, I have my own book to read, and shall make myself very comfortable, so you had better be off at once, for the tables were spread as I passed the vicar’s field, and the children being marshalled into their places. Don’t miss your pleasure for me, or I shall consider my afternoon has been wasted.’

‘You’re main good, ma’am,’ says the girl

for the second time, as she takes advantage of the permission extended to her and runs downstairs, leaving Delia alone with old Simon Strother.



CHAPTER VI.

‘WHAT DOES HE KEEP IN THAT PARCEL?’

As soon as Patsy has disappeared, Delia attempts to ingratiate herself with her surly companion.

‘Shall I read to you, Mr. Strother?’

‘Wha’ll ye be arter readin’?’ he asks.

He is a freckled, lynx-eyed old man, who has been carroty-headed in his youth, and still retains many red hairs mingled with his stubbly white beard. He sits on the bed and full upon the mysterious bundle, with which he never parts company, so that he is perched many feet above his visitor, and looks

down upon her like some dirty, unholy imp, with a countenance replete with suspicion and low cunning.

‘I will read anything you please, Mr. Strother. Do you take any interest in the news? I have to-day’s paper with me.’

‘Na, na! I care nobbut the news.’

‘Would you like to hear a chapter out of the Bible?’

‘Na, na! I care nobbut the Buik.’

‘What *do* you care for then?’

‘I care nobbut ae thing. Ye’d best gang your way.’

‘But I have promised not to leave you alone, so I must stay here till Patsy returns.’

‘Aye! Dinna fash me then!’

And the old wretch places his elbows on his knees and his head upon his hands, and closes his eyes in intimation that he considers the interview, as far as conversation is concerned, to be concluded.

Delia thinks that if this is part of the penance Mr. Le Mesurier promised to impose upon her, it ought to wipe off a good many of her sins. She retreats a little distance from her discourteous host, and, drawing the book on which she is engaged from her leather bag, commences to read for her own amusement. An occasional grunt from Mr. Strother is all the sound that breaks the silence, but she cannot help every now and then stealing a glance at the comical figure perched upon the packet on the bed.

By-and-by she recalls Kennett's assertion that the old creature frets sorely after his native land, and makes a second effort to interest him.

‘You have been in Scotland, Strother?’

‘Aiblins I have—conseederin’ it’s my ain country.’

‘Do you like it better than England?’

‘Mubbe I do!’

‘Would you like to go back again?’

‘Aye! but there’s nane left at hame as ken me noo.’

‘Ah; that makes a great difference, does it not? But you have good friends here to love you and look after you, and a beautiful place to live in. Do you ever go to church, Strother? or to the kirk as you call it in Scotland?’

As she puts this simple question, a transformation seems to pass over the old man. He has been ordinarily intelligent hitherto, but now he suddenly collapses and becomes incoherent. His little bleared eyes roll wildly; his hand is clenched; and the saliva bubbles from his mouth and drops upon his grizzled beard.

‘The kirk—the kirk!’ he utters excitedly, ‘wha’ll harm the kirk? Muster Gray munna do it, and the starm munna do it, for the water will aye come doon and pet it oot.’

And the poor mun, wha'll dream the puir auld mun wha's been twenty years aboot the place, and been main car'ful and aye dune his duty, could mak a meestake at the lairst. Ye saw Muster Gray do it, didna ye noo?' he exclaims, making a dash at Delia, who is backing towards the door, with serious thoughts of beating a retreat downstairs. 'Ye mun say ye saw the carle do it, or I'll mak ye greet for the day we ever met.'

'Of course I saw him do it—everybody saw him do it,' she replies boldly, for she can gather his meaning without comprehending his words; 'but don't excite yourself in that way, Mr. Strother, or you may make yourself ill.'

'Eel! eel!' he ejaculates slowly, as he wipes the sweat off his forehead with a ragged cotton handkerchief. 'Hae I been weel sin' the day? But 'twas an awfu' starm surely. Eno' to barn the grondest

edifeece that mun ever raised. And puir Simon was only the clairk, and coudna be expected to ken the reason of the fire. 'Twas an awfu' sight to see it barn, with the flames leekin' oop the rafters and the roof, and cracklin through the beeldin'.'

'Of what are you speaking?' says Delia, curiously. 'Have you ever been in a fire, Mr. Strother?'

The old man eyes her suspiciously, and becomes silent.

'Do tell me all about it,' she coaxes. 'I love to hear a story, and you tell it so well.'

'Aye! But ye want to drair the seecret frae me, and ye wullna do it, na! na! Simon's a puir auld mun, but he can keep a seecret wi' the best o' thun.'

'Indeed! I don't wish to know your secret, Mr. Strother. I only want to hear about the fire. Was it in Scotland?'

'Na! na! t'wasna in my ain country, but

'twas an awfu' fire. But Muster Gray did it, and ye saw him do it, and ye canna go back frae your spoken waird.'

'Of course not! I do not wish to do so.'

'Weel then, ye maun be content. If ye saw the carle do it, ye ken a' about the fire, and need nane to tell it ye.'

She laughs quietly at the trap the cunning old creature has set for her, and returns to the contemplation of her book, little thinking of the import Mr. Strother's secret is to her.

Presently, he fidgets about on the top of his bundle, and she asks him if he is comfortable.

'Why don't you sit in a chair instead of on that great packet, Mr. Strother? I'm sure it must be a very hard seat.'

'It does weel eno' for me.'

'But it would pack away so nicely under

the bed, and your room would look all the tidier without it.'

'Aye! But I conseeder it's best whar' it is.'

'I suppose there's a box inside that wrapping?'

'Aiblins!'

'A box with clothes in it. Do you never take off the covers, Mr. Strother?'

'I've no need to tak' them off.'

'Do you never want to look at your treasures, then?'

'I dinna ken what you're speakin' aboot.'

'Do you never look at the things you've got in that parcel—well, *the books*, or whatever they may be!'

Simon Strother springs up from his perch like a jack-in-the box, and comes down again upon the packet, glaring at his visitor.

'The buiks! the buiks! what do ye ken about the buiks? I was main car'ful of

them. The fire burned the kirk, but it coudna hairm the buiks, because the puir auld chiel carried them safe to his hame. He lo'ed the buiks better than his bairns, and the awfu' fire daurna barn them! Hoot! see the lightnin', and listen to the peals of thoonder! The puir lassie 'ull be skeered wi' the flashes and the rain. Dinna greet, my puir wee thing! Dootless but theer's haired times before ye, but ye willna hae your wits barned oot like puir auld Simon, wha saw the whole edefeece come to the groond. But he saved the buiks—the gude auld buiks that had sairved the peerish for so mony years. Aye! he was main car'ful of the buiks, and nane could thraw bleeme upon him becaise the buiks came to hairm!

The books! the fire! the kirk! Something like a gleam is dawning upon Delia's mind. It cannot be! It is altogether too unlikely—yet if it were!

‘Mr. Strother,’ she cries, ‘what was the name of the place where the kirk was burned down?’

‘What! ye saw it dune, and ye canna remember the name of the place!’ he returns, with a cunning leer.

‘I was so frightened by the fire I forgot to ask the name,’ she says, making a bold attempt at extracting the truth from him.

‘Aye! The fire skeered you as it did me. And mubbe ye air the puir lassie hersel’ wha got married in the starm. I mind hoo skeered she looked when she writ her name doon in my buiks, but I canna remember hoo she was called.’

‘Was there a girl married on that day in the church? Is it the storm at Chilton in Berwick you are speaking of? The lightning that burned Chilton Church to the ground twenty years ago?’

‘Cheelton! Cheelton!’ screams the old

man, 'wha daurs to meention Cheelton in Barwick to me? I ken naethin' of the toon. I dinna ken if there is a kirk in Cheelton or no. I'm a Heelandmun, I ken naethin' of the Barder-land, and if any say I do, they lee. I tell ye they lee. Get oot!' he continues angrily to Delia; 'ye're a leear, I say—a dommed leear! and there's naethin' in this paircel but a peer o' breeks. What woud ye be luikin' at the auld mun's breeks for? Get oot, I say, and leave me to mysel'; I wullna hae ye speering aboot my room in this shameless manner. And as for the paircel, it's my paircel, and ye shallna hae my breeks; I'll see ye dee fairst.'

Delia, now fairly alarmed, rushes towards the door, and stumbles down the narrow staircase, where, to her infinite comfort, she encounters Patsy Kennett, who, much flushed and smiling, is mounting to relieve guard.

‘O, Patsy ! I am so thankful you have returned. Your grandfather has frightened me out of my senses.’

‘Has he, now ? It’s just like him ! The old hunks can’t keep a civil tongue in his head for ten minutes together. But lor, ma’am, you’re all of a trimble ! Do ’e come down into the parlour now, and let me get ye a drink of tea, or summat, before ye go.’

‘No, thank you, Patsy ! I shall be all right directly. But I want to ask you a few questions. How long is it since your grandfather left Scotland ?’

‘A matter of five year or more, ma’am. We had never seen the old gentleman before then, and I’m sure I wish we’d never seen him at all, for the trouble he gives is past believing.’

‘Is he mad, Patsy ?’

‘Bless ye ! yes, ma’am ! as mad as a March hare—though the worst he ever does is to

give the rough side of his tongue. Ye see the way of it was this. Poor mother, she come from Scotland, and feyther, he picked her up when she was in sarvice in London, and brought her down here. Meantime, grandfeyther goes silly up at her old home, and when grandmother died and there was no one left to see arter the old man, mother she prayed feyther to have him to Cloverfield. Well, I always thought he brought ill-luck to the house, for six months arter he came, poor mother fell sick of her last illness, and grandfeyther's been left to my care ever since. Parson, I know, wanted feyther to get rid of the old gentleman, but he promised mother he wouldn't, and so there 'tis, and there it must be, till the Almighty's good enough to take him.'

'But what drove him out of his senses, Patsy?'

''Twas a big fire, ma'am, and he was terrible

burnt in it. You can see the scars on his breast and shoulders now. You see grand-feyther, he was parish clerk at a place called Chilton——’

‘Not Chilton in Berwick, Patsy?’

‘Yes, ma’am! that’s the place!’

‘Gracious Heavens! is it possible? But Mr. Strother denied just now that he’d ever been there.’

‘Ah! that’s his cunning! He won’t bear the least talking to on the subject. But there was an awful fire there that burned down the church and the parsonage, and no one ever knew how it happened; but grand-feyther lost his situation, and took it so to heart that he’s never been right in his head since.’

‘Parish clerk of Chilton in Berwick!’ murmurs Delia; ‘how wonderful I should have met him here, Patsy! I was married at that church on the very day it was burned

down, and your grandfather must have been present at the ceremony.'

'Lor'! how strange! And now I come to think of it, ma'am, he often talks in his ravings about a young lady—a "lassie" he calls her—who was married in the midst of the storm. Bless me! that is queer.'

'Patsy, what has he got in that bundle?'

'Ah! now you beat me, ma'am! No one, not even poor mother, ever saw the inside of that bundle. Often and often I've threatened to burn it whilst the old creature lay asleep, but feyther says he'll take the stick to me if I do. And he sleeps with his head on it too, ma'am, and hardly ever leaves sight of it, night or day!'

'Does he never go out, then?'

'Only once and again in the garden for an hour or so, and then he locks his door, and takes the key along of him. O! he is a crankums, I can tell ye!'

‘What *can* he keep in that huge parcel?’

‘Some think it’s stones—or sticks—or maybe rags. He brought it with him as it is, and has never undone it. Parson tried to look at it once, and the old man nearly bit him. He won’t look at parson now, and ye’d better never mention the name before him.’

‘Couldn’t you find out by any means what is in that parcel, Patsy?’

Delia has become wonderfully curious about the old clerk’s worldly possessions.

‘I durstn’t, ma’am. Feyther would nearly kill me, and the old man would quite. I’d sooner walk up and scratch the nose of Farmer Simpson’s mad bull.’

‘Ah! well! I dare say (as you seem to think) there’s nothing of consequence in it. How did the féast go off?’

‘Beautifully, ma’am; and I’m main obliged to you for letting me go. The tea was lovely, and Mrs. Bond gave me such a handsome

neck-ribbon. I told parson ye were here, and he said he should be looking out for ye as ye go back again, to hear how you fared with grandfeyther.'

'I am afraid I shall not have a very cheering account to give him. The old man would neither let me read nor talk to him. *When* does he go into the garden, do you say?'

'Most days, ma'am, when it's fine. In the afternoon, when he's had his dinner and wants to smoke a pipe.'

'I think I would rather talk to him there than in the room, which is rather close. Well, good-bye, Patsy! I will try and look in again, the end of the week.'

She hurries from the farm parlour as she speaks—her head in a whirl of excitement—her heart not knowing what it dares to hope for—her mind, filled with one thought, the wish to meet and tell all to Mr. Le Mesurier. At the end of the long lane that precedes the

village road she sees him, walking thoughtfully to and fro, and evidently waiting for her.

The feast is over : he has done his share of handing plates of buns and filling mugs with milk and water, and the children are dispersed at play about the field—howling, running, tumbling, and yelling, in the semi-savage idiotic manner that the young of the human race adopt as a means of testifying to their enjoyment of life, in which art they fall far below the inferior animals, possessing neither the agility nor the grace of kittens, nor the innocence nor good temper of puppies.

It is not a scene calculated to afford pleasure to any educated mind : and it jars on that of Le Mesurier like a false chord in music. As he turns and catches sight of Delia's advancing figure, his face brightens. She reaches his side, breathless with haste.

‘O! Mr. Le Mesurier, I have such a

wonderful piece of news to tell you. Who on earth do you suppose old Simon Strother turns out to be ?

‘ Benjamin Kennett’s father-in-law.’

‘ He is much more than that, I can assure you ! He is, or rather he was, the parish clerk of the church in Chilton, at which I told you I was married to James Moray.’

‘ Is it possible ?’

‘ Indeed it is. He has been telling me the whole story.’

‘ But can you trust the man’s account of himself ? Don’t forget the state of his mind !’

‘ He cannot have invented it all. He described the storm and the fire to me. He even spoke of myself, or rather of the girl whom he remembers to have seen married on that very morning. Besides, Patsy Kennett corroborates all the historical part of his recital !’

‘How it has excited you. You are trembling all over. But tell me, now! Supposing it to be all true, what difference can it make to you?’

‘I do not know! Only I feel as if something would come of it. And the old man let out that he had books in that parcel which, Patsy says, he will never lose sight of. Mr. Le Mesurier, will you let me see the books for the registry of marriages which you keep in your vestry?’

‘My dear friend, what are you driving at now?’

‘I have never seen such books that I can remember! I do not know what they look like outside.’

‘Very musty, and dirty, and worn—especially in a small parish like this, where they last for years.’

‘I must go and look at them to-morrow, that I may be able to recognise them if

necessary. I suppose they are all much alike.'

'Mrs. Manners ! what do you mean ?'

'I mean, that in an unguarded moment, old Strother divulged to me that his parcel held books, and the thought has struck me—I believe it is an inspiration—that they are the Chilton vestry books of which he had charge.'

'But that is the unlikeliest thing in the world. You told me that the church was burned to the ground in the night, and all that was in it. And did not your husband's brother, William Moray, when he wanted to get hold of your boy, send a messenger to Chilton in hopes of getting the certificate of marriage—without success. You are permitting your imagination to run away with you, Mrs. Manners. Even if Simon Strother were the clerk at Chilton, he would never have been allowed to make off with the

parish registry books. It is altogether unlikely !'

'But he is mad, remember, Mr. Le Mesurier. Patsy says he was badly burned in the fire, and has been silly ever since. And how came he to be burned, if he were not attempting to save something from the flames? Besides, he told me he had saved the "buiks." He got fearfully excited at something I said to him, and declared he loved the "buiks" more than his own children, and no one could ever say they had come to harm.'

'And so you think the "buiks" must needs be tied up in his old bundle,' says Mr. Le Mesurier, smiling.

'I feel *sure* of it! O! don't laugh at me. Think what a change it will make in my whole life, if the idea only proves true!'

'I do think of it, and that is why I am so anxious your hope should not lead you astray.

I know what the disappointment will be if it proves fallacious ! And I fear you have so little foundation to go upon.'

Delia's face falls.

'Do you really ? Still I *must* see the contents of that bundle. I shall never be satisfied till I have convinced myself one way or the other.'

'How do you propose to accomplish it ?'

'I cannot decide yet, but I have been thinking of it all the way home. Patsy says the old man sits in the garden when the afternoon is fine. Now if I can only get into his room when he is out of it, I will have all those wrappers off in ten minutes.'

'You may be sure he secures his precious package from intrusion before he consents to leave it. Kennett has told me that he refuses to get off it, day or night.'

'Yes, and Patsy says he locks his door whilst he is away. But the window must be

accessible from the back garden. I could get up by a ladder, and smash in the glass if I find it fastened.'

'You'll be indicted for housebreaking with burglarious and felonious intent, if you don't take care, Mrs. Manners. And when you have opened the bundle, at the risk of your personal safety perhaps, you will find a mass of filthy rags.'

'I care nothing about my personal safety—I care only to find my unfortunate marriage certificate. Will you help me to do so?'

'Most certainly I will, to the extent of communicating our suspicions to the police, and forcing Mr. Strother to disclose his hidden treasures. Only I think we had better try soft measures first, and if you can make your way, with the girl's help or without it, into the old man's room, and unrip the bundle for yourself, it will certainly be the easier plan.'

‘Patsy is too much afraid of her father to help me. I must do it alone! Do you think I might give old Strother a glass of wine with something in it to make him go to sleep, first?’

Mr. Le Mesurier laughs loud at the suggestion.

‘What a manœuvrer you are, Mrs. Manners! You’ll be hocussing me the next time you want to get me out of the way. I think you might venture on the wine though, without the “something” in it, and it will probably have all the desired effect. Or, what will be better still, give him a glass of whisky. You have heard how Scotchmen love their “whusky,” and Mr. Strother will probably not be able to stand proof against the temptation.’

‘Of course! That will be the very thing! I will take him a bottle!’

‘Don’t kill him outright, or you may be

indicted for manslaughter along with the other misdemeanours. I am laughing again, Mrs. Manners, but believe me how sincerely I am interested in this new hope of yours, and how rejoiced I shall be at its fulfilment.'

'And believe me, Mr. Le Mesurier, that I will not rest hand nor foot till I have reached the bottom of that mystery, be it what it may !'



CHAPTER VII.

‘MAY I ASK YOU A FAVOUR IN RETURN?’

THE most natural thing to suppose is, that Delia runs straight home, after her interview with the parson, to repeat the discovery she has made to Mrs. Bond. But, strange to say, she does nothing of the sort. A hundred times during the evening is it on the tip of her tongue to tell it, and a hundred times her courage fails her, and she decides she will wait a little longer and discover a little more, before she makes her friend the recipient of her confidence. She believes and

trusts in Mrs. Hephzibah as she does in no other mortal creature, but she is just the least bit afraid of ridicule from her caustic tongue. Clever women, as a rule, are not favourites with their own sex. Their comments are too unflattering, and their scent too keen, and their judgment too frankly delivered, not to render those with less knowledge and sharpness fearful of encountering a passage-of-arms with them.

Delia is no fool. She can hold her own with most people, but Mrs. Hephzibah has so little patience with romance and all its attendant excitement, that she will probably laugh unmercifully at the chimera, as she will call it, which has been raised by Delia's imagination, and cause some unpleasantness between them. For it is hard to hear our dearest hopes ridiculed in silence. And yet Delia would endure anything rather than

quarrel, however slightly, with her friend. So she determines to keep her suspicions to herself, until they have become certainties.

The next day has scarcely begun before she has reason to rejoice at her reticence. Mrs. Hephzibah follows her from the breakfast-room into the drawing-room.

‘Delia, my dear, shall you have any objection to be left to take care of the cottage by yourself for a week or two?’

‘Certainly not, Mrs. Hephzibah. But why? Are you going away?’

‘William must do so, and I want to accompany him. That fool Bob has got into a mess, and writes to his father to back a bill for him, and he shan’t do it, as sure as my name’s Hephzibah Horton—I mean—Bond! As if I didn’t know what backing a bill for five hundred pounds for Master Bob means! Giving him the money out of

our own pockets, without his having the courage to ask for it, nor our having the credit of generosity.'

'You don't think he will pay it back again?'

'He *can't* pay it back. It's an impossibility. He draws a salary of eight hundred a year, and has got a wife and four children, who eat up every sixpence as fast as it comes into the house. William mumbles some rubbish about Bob being an honourable man and repaying him by instalments; but you know what William is, and always was—a simple creature that a child of two years old might twist round his little finger. And I won't stand by and see him robbed. Bob has no business, with his salary, to require such a loan. But I guess how it's come about. Madam has not been able to pick the bones of her poor old father-in-law for the last six months, and has run up bills in

consequence, and expects him to pay them. I'll see her further first !

‘What do you mean to do, Mrs. Hephzibah?’ demands Delia, who quite pities poor Mrs. Bob, whatever her delinquencies may be, for having to go through an interview with her determined mamma-in-law.

‘*Do!* my dear! Why, I shall make very short work of it. I shall say to Bob, “Now look here, my boy. Hand over those bills of your wife’s at once, and I’ll pay them—for the first and last time though, you will please to remember; and if your father is such a fool as even to think of backing a bill for you, for five pounds or five pence—why, I’ll take over the charge of his whole income from this hour, and not a man-jack of you shall inherit a halfpenny of it.” No! no! I know the little old man’s a fool, and I’ve often called him so, but no one else shall apply the term to him whilst I live, and

that you may take your oath of, Delia Moray !'

'I am sure you will settle everything in the best possible way for all parties, Mrs. Hephzibah.'

'And you're not afraid to stay in the cottage by yourself till we return.'

'Afraid ! Of what should I be afraid ?'

'I'm sure I don't know ! I don't know what half the women in this world are afraid of, and yet they are ! However, I shall consider the thing settled, and start to-morrow. We may be absent a week or a fortnight. It will depend entirely upon the amount of Bob's liabilities, or his father's obstinacy. But if it takes me six weeks to settle, I don't return home till I've seen it done.'

'All right, dear friend ! If your absence is even extended to six weeks (for which I should be sincerely sorry) you will find me

at my post when you return, and everything, I hope, in the strictest order.'

She sees now that she was wise not to disclose her interview with old Strother too soon. She might have unduly excited Mrs. Hephzibah's curiosity, or even prevented her accompanying her husband to London.

Now, the coast will be clear for action, and she and Mr. Le Mesurier will be able to work together, or apart, as they may see fit. The prospect of freedom of action gives her renewed courage, and hope rises up strong within her and makes her ready to sing with anticipation. She looks so bright and gay, indeed, on the morning of their departure, that Mrs. Hephzibah's lynx eyes detect the change, and her tongue remarks upon it :

'What are you hopping about and dancing all over the place like a parched pea for, Delia Moray?' she inquires sharply. 'It looks very

much as if you were glad to get rid of us for awhile.'

'O! Mrs. Hephzibah! how can you think of such a thing!'

'I didn't think of it till you put it in my head. However, I'll be charitable and lay all your activity to your desire to get us off in good time. I suppose you will enjoy an extra quantity of the parson's company when we're out of the way.'

'I suppose I shall see him about as often as I do now,' replies Delia, with a slight accession of colour.

'Fiddle-de-dee! my dear! The whole world is not blind! We all know what Mr. Le Mesurier comes here for! Only, don't go and marry him without giving us notice—that's all.'

'Dear friend! you do make me so uncomfortable by your remarks. Please don't joke on that subject any more. You must know

there is no foundation for what you say !'

'I don't know anything of the sort,' returns Mrs. Hephzibah pertinaciously. 'However, you're both free agents, and have a right to judge for yourselves. Now! don't bid me good-bye with that long face! Laugh and look happy, or I shall believe my worst suspicions to be correct.'

Delia does laugh, and bids her friend a very affectionate farewell, though the subject she broached worries her for some hours after the pony-carriage has driven away to the station with its owners. Why cannot a middle-aged man and woman feel and express a friendship for each other, without the bystanders immediately attributing their intimacy to a warmer feeling. Mr. Le Mesurier, too, who has never by word or look hinted at love for her—whose breast conceals a sorrow which she feels sure is connected with some woman's death or

desertion—how cruel it is, even in jest, to link their names together. It makes her quite shy with the parson on the first occasion of his entering the cottage; but when he proposes a visit to the church and the vestry-books, she joins in the plan with alacrity and prepares to accompany him at once.

‘What queer-looking things!’ she says, as she examines the rough, brown leather covers in which the volumes are bound; ‘and the ink in which the first entries are made is quite faded and pale. Fifty years ago, Mr. Le Mesurier! Is it possible this book has lasted all that time?’

‘Quite possible in Cloverfield, where we do not celebrate half-a-dozen marriages a year. What is it, Mrs. Webber?’

This last question is addressed to the pew-opener, who is employed in cleaning the church, and now beckons him mysteriously to her side from the open vestry-door.

‘Excuse me a moment,’ Mr. Le Mesurier says hurriedly to Delia, as he passes into the chancel.

She continues to turn over the record of the Cloverfield marriages with a sort of undefined curiosity. Is it possible that on the preservation of a slip of scribbled paper like one of these depends the validity of a union which, by the loss of it, may be the means of so much misery? She shudders as she recalls what the loss of her own has entailed upon her, and turns over the leaves rapidly. As she does so, a name catches her eye—one name amongst the hundreds she has gazed upon mechanically—and she reads the record.

On such and such a day, ‘John Le Mesurier, bachelor, of Dublin, to Adela Coombes, spinster, of Southampton.’

She looks at the date: it is that of fifteen years ago—five years before the present

Mr. Le Mesurier came to reside in the parish. Still, it seems strange that he should not have noticed the name being similar to his own ; but perhaps, she argues, clergymen never take the trouble to read the records of marriages that occur before they had charge of the parish.

‘Is this a relation of yours?’ she asks promptly, as her friend returns to the vestry. ‘The name is precisely the same, you see—John Le Mesurier ; but he was married five years before you came here, so perhaps you never saw the certificate.’

Pointing with her finger to the entry, she turns to confront the clergyman, and is amazed to see the pallor that has overspread his face.

‘Mr. Le Mesurier ! are you not well ?’

‘I am quite well, thank you ! Have you finished examining this musty old book ? Then, I think we may as well lock it up

again ! About Mr. John Le Mesurier, who appropriates my lawful cognomen ! Yes ! I believe he must be some sort of connection of mine, because the name is not a common one ; but I never knew him, and as you say, the event happened long before I ever saw the place !

But he is very pale still, and the muscles of his face are working nervously.

‘There are no Coombes living about here now,’ remarks Delia thoughtfully.

‘O ! no ! There is nobody of the name here. There never was !’ replies Mr. Le Mesurier, in the same agitated and uncertain manner. ‘Now, you are quite sure you will know a vestry-book again, to swear to—won’t you ?’ he continues with a sickly attempt to smile ; ‘and be able to tell at once if old Strother’s possessions are the property of the church, or his own ?’

‘O ! I think so ; and, Mr. Le Mesurier, I

assure you his parcel is just the size to contain three or four of these books—making allowance for all the wrappings they are sewn in.’

‘When do you intend to make your first raid upon these wrappings?’

‘To-morrow, I think; but I shall not go unless it is a really hot afternoon, that will tempt the old man to sit out for some time in the garden. Do you not come my way!’

‘No! thanks! I have a visit to pay to the Temples. Good-afternoon!’

He raises his hat and strides off abruptly.

Delia is just wondering what can be the reason of his sudden alteration of manner, when he retraces his steps and overtakes her.

‘Mrs. Manners, when you told me a secret that affected your daily happiness you relied on me for respecting your confidence and keeping it sacred, did you not?’

‘Certainly I did!’

‘Have I belied your trust?’

‘I am sure you have not!’

‘Then may I ask you a favour in return, not to mention to any one the record you saw just now of my—my—relation’s marriage? He is not a person to be proud of, and the marriage was strictly private, and for many reasons it is desirable it should remain so! I know you will oblige me in this particular. Good-day.’

And, raising his hat once more, Mr. Le Mesurier leaves her again without waiting for the assurance he has so earnestly required.

Delia does not know what to think of this little episode, but she has always considered her clergyman friend to be rather strange and erratic in his moods, and ascribes his anxiety on the subject of the marriage record not being mentioned to some fad of his own, certainly not to anything that can con-

cern her. She has so much to think of and plan for herself at this moment that she has no leisure to speculate upon the actions of her acquaintances. She ponders hour after hour on the best means of conciliating old Strother, and rendering her voyage of discovery easier; but she reaches Kennett's farm the following day without having arrived at any definite conclusion as to what course it will be better to pursue.

It is a broiling afternoon, and Delia has felt the trudge up the long lane very trying; but she is rewarded by the first sight that meets her eyes being that of the old Scotchman sunning himself by the beehives. He looks only a trifle less offensive in the open air than he did in his close bedroom, and he receives his visitor with no greater cordiality. But she is delighted to see that he is smoking his pipe, and she has a little flask of Scotch whisky hidden away in her pocket.

‘What a lovely day, Mr. Strother! I am so glad to find you out! Where is Patsy?’

‘I dinna ken.’

‘Does she find it too hot in the garden? I almost think I do! May I go round and ask her for a glass of water?’

‘Ye canna fash me wi’ what ye do.’

Accepting the ungracious permission extended to her, Delia walks up the gravel path to the farmhouse. Her object is two-fold: first, to find out where Patsy may be; and secondly, to obtain a glass of water in which to put the whisky. At the open door she meets a serving-girl.

‘Is Miss Patsy in, Jane?’

‘Well, she ain’t azackly in, mum, but she won’t be long. She’s only rin out the back way to meet a friend, and I’m keeping watch in case the maister should return and make a rumpus about it. Poor Miss Patsy’s got

very little time to hersel', mum, so ye maunt tell the maister of her.'

'To be sure not, Jane ! I have only come to beg for a glass of water. The day is so hot, and I am very thirsty.'

The farm maiden lifts down a mug from the nail on which it hangs, and makes her way out into the back garden.

'The poomp's at the back,' she says in going.

Delia follows her. To examine the back of the house is her desire.

She finds that the 'poomp' stands in a wilderness of currant-bushes and raspberry-canecanes, now stript of their fruit, and the wall of the house is thickly covered with a vine of many years' growth. On either side of the back-door are windows with latticed panes and broad sills ; the lower one to the right is the scullery window, the one above it she believes to belong to the bedroom of

old Strother, and it is fastened open by an iron hook.

‘Is that the old gentleman’s room?’ she asks indifferently of the servant.

‘Yiss, mum, that’s his’n, and ’twull be a good day for all concerned when he’s laid out in it.’

‘Does he make himself so very unpleasant, then?’

‘’Twould take a month, mum, to tell ye half his noosances.’

Delia walks up to the window-sill, and finds it is amply wide enough to stand upon. In the scullery are a set of steps with which she could easily reach the upper window. Given ten minutes to herself, and she feels sure that her work would be accomplished. She is active and lissom still, although the mother of a man. The worst difficulty will be to get the servant, who appears to be the only person within hail, out of the way. But

Delia has her purse in her pocket and knows the power of money. She has no fear, when the time comes, of not being able either to get rid of Jane or to make use of her.

‘Will Miss Patsy be long?’ she inquires.

‘I think not, mum, for she and I is the only ones at home. It’s harvesting, you see, and the men are all at work in the field. But I promised Miss Patsy to see arter the old gennelman, and he’s right enough in the gardin, so maybe she won’t hurry, and particular as she’s gone to meet her young man.’

‘I see! Well, give me a little more water, Jane—thanks! that will do! And now I will go and talk to Mr. Strother, and keep a good look-out for the master coming up the lane.’

She returns to the old clerk full of hope for the success of her project. But to her

surprise she finds he has left his seat and is peering in at the open front door.

‘What air ye speerin’ sae lang wi’ the lass fur?’ he asks in his usual suspicious way.

‘I was only getting some water to drink, Mr. Strother,’ replies Delia cheerfully. ‘I find a little weak whisky-and-water the most cooling drink possible on these burning afternoons.’

‘Whusky! What can a leddy ken aboot whusky?’

‘O! don’t I “ken” about it! You forget I have lived in Scotland, where every one acquires a liking for it, and my friend Mr. Bond has some of the finest Scotch whisky in his cellar you ever tasted.’

‘Aye! It’s mony a day sin’ the like o’ me tasted whusky.’

‘Why! do you never have any now?’

‘Wha’ll an auld mon like me find the baw-

bees to buy whusky? D'ye theenk that carle Kennett 'ud give 'em me. Ah! ye dinna ken how close he keeps the puir auld mon wha's got naethin' left of his ane. Ay me! it's deevil a bawbee he ever pets in my han'.'

The old creature is evidently beginning to trust her, Delia thinks, for she has never heard him so communicative before.

'Whusky' and 'bawbees' — the two great national idols before which Scotchmen bend their knees more fervently than ever Catholic bowed before his patron saint—what may she not accomplish with them both?

'Mr. Strother, I want you to taste my whisky, and if you think it good, I shall bring you a bottle for yourself.'

'A hale bottle o' whusky to mysel'? Aye! but ye're the richt sort o' leddy to veesit a puir auld chiel like me.'

With his old tongue he commences to lick

his lips as she produces the spirit-flask, and the wrinkled hand he extends for the glass trembles visibly. Delia has taken care to make the dose a potent one, and Strother takes it down at a draught.

‘Aye! but that’s summat like whusky!’ ejaculates the old sinner, as the last drop trickles down his throat.

‘Would you like a little more?’ cries Delia.

‘Wall, I’m no sayin’ that I couldna tak’ a wee drappie more—but I’m na strang in the stummick, leddy, and I’m thinkin’ that mubbe, if ye werena to pet the wetter in it this time, I shouldna rin the risk of takin’ cauld in my insides.’

‘Of course not! How foolish of me not to think of it!’ exclaims Delia, placing the flask itself (which once contained half-a-pint of sherry from a railway station) in his hands.

Old Strother's bleared eyes light up with sensual pleasure as he applies his lips to the neck of this little bottle, and expresses his satisfaction at its contents by loud and prolonged smacks. But he does not grow sleepy so soon as Delia expected. Either he is more accustomed to drinking spirits than he will acknowledge, or his head is very strong; but though he becomes less loquacious and makes absurd faces to himself in the air, his eyes do not show any disposition to close.

Delia commences her wiles again.

'Do you like the whisky, Strother?'

'It's jeest the barder-land to heeven, leddy.'

'You would like me to give you a whole bottle to yourself, wouldn't you?'

'You wouldna expeect me to pee for it?' he says, with a sudden fear.

Delia cannot help laughing.

‘Certainly not! I mean to make you a present of it.’

‘I haena a bawbee o’ my ain to sweer by. I ken weel I had plenty in the auld days, but there’s nane, noo my puir bairn Kennett’s gane, to ceer if the auld chiel hae his bawbees or na.’

‘Shall I give you some bawbees?’ says Delia, holding out a five-shilling-piece to him.

He snatches it eagerly.

‘Aye! but the siller’s beautifu’! Hoot! hoo it glistens i’ the soon. The lairge handsom’ bit o’ siller with the heed o’ the queen upon it. I mun pet it in my paircel—I munna let that carle Kennett or that hizzy Patsy speer at my siller, or mubbe they’ll tak’ it away agin. They’ll tak’ my beautifu’ bawbee frae me and buy shoon wi’ it. Ha! ha! the siller piece shall rest in my paircel wi’—wi’——’

‘With what, Strother?’ interrupts Delia anxiously, observing that he halts.

‘Wi’ my *breeks*, leddy!’ he says with a leer.

The old man is as clever as herself, and not to be taken in one moment sooner. She wanders from him up and down the garden, hoping that silence may induce repose. At the tenth turn, seeing his eyes still wide open, she begins to despair, and believes her afternoon, whisky, and crown-piece to have been all three thrown away; but as she saunters towards him for the twelfth time, she perceives, to her great joy, that his head has fallen forward on his breast, and he has commenced to nod, with those short, uncomfortable jerks that assail one when sleeping in a chair.

Delia crawls up and down the path a little longer, and then, seeing that all is safe, skims past the sleeping old man noiselessly, and

rushes to the back garden. There is no time to waste now ; she must do her work rapidly and without delay.

‘Jane,’ she exclaims, going at once to the point, ‘here is half-a-sovereign for you ! I want that set of steps placed against this wall. I have a great fancy to gather some of the bunches of grapes that hang up there by the second window !’

Jane, who probably has never possessed half-a-sovereign all to herself in her life, stares at the coin as if she were in a dream.

‘I must have it at once ; do you hear ?’ repeats Delia ; ‘or it will be of no use to me.’

‘Sure, ma’am—but they isn’t ripe yet.’

‘Never mind that ! You bring the steps.’

The girl has them in her arms as she speaks, and places them against the wall without further remonstrance.

Delia mounts them like a squirrel.

‘What a quare fancy!’ thinks the servant as she watches the lady’s ascent.

But she has half-a-sovereign in her hand, and she cares for nothing else.

As Delia reaches the second window, she tells Jane to re-enter the house and watch the sleeping man for her. As soon as ever the girl has disappeared, she is on the sill and through the open casement.

Yes, here is the same room in which her last interview was held with the old clerk of Chilton; and there stands his bed, with the immortal package on the top of it.

She sits down, and, taking out a pair of scissors provided for the purpose, commences to unrip the stitching of the wrappers. She has never calculated on the difficulty of her task. The box, or books, or whatever the contents may be, have been stitched and re-stitched with thick twine, so that the old man

appears to have spent days over his task. At last, by dint of blunted implements and bruised fingers, Delia has succeeded in removing the outer wrapper of American cloth, when she finds herself confronted by a second one of drugget or baize, as hard to work through as the first.

She tries to cut right through the centre of the package, but some hard substance resists the scissors ; she must have patience and proceed by degrees.

As she has half unripped the second covering, however, she is startled by a noise upon the uncarpeted stairs—the sound of approaching footsteps stumbling up the narrow gangway. What can it be ? Is it possible that Strother can have awakened from his slumber and had his suspicions aroused by her absence ? She flies to the casement which looks out upon the front. It is true ! He has left his chair, and a key

is already grating and twisting about in the keyhole of the door.

Delia has no time for consideration—no time to do anything but escape by the way she came, so, leaving the ‘paircel’ in the state to which she has reduced it, and not waiting even to recover her fallen scissors, she leaps on to the window-sill, and is down the steps and standing on the gravel path below before an eye has seen her proceedings.

Her next effort is to place the steps where she found them, and thence to proceed, flushed and panting, into the front-kitchen, where Jane is quietly seated, shelling broad-beans, with her half-sovereign laid on the table beside her.

‘The old gentleman’s gone through up to his room,’ are the first words with which she placidly greets Delia. ‘My goodness! what’s that?’

She alludes to a loud scream, like the note

of an angry ape in pain, which proceeds from Strother's chamber. Delia knows full well what it is, and prepares to fly from further questioning. But the old man's ravings reach them but too distinctly.

‘Wha’s been in my room?’ he cries.
‘Wha’s daured to tooch my paircel? Let me find the carle and I’ll wreeng his neek for him. I’ll ken wha’s daured to fash me. I was anely i’ the gairden takin’ a wee drap o’ whusky, and naebody hae been i’ the house but Jean. It maun be that hizzy Jean. Heer! Jean, Jean!’

‘You had better go to the old man and quiet him, Jane,’ says Delia. ‘Tell him no one has been in his room. How could they, with the door locked? I’m afraid I may have given him a little too much whisky. Do what you can with him, and I’ll go and tell Miss Patsy, whom I see coming up the garden, all about it.’

Miss Patsy does not think anything of the affair. Mrs. Manners is 'main' good, she says, to trouble about 'the old hunks,' but no one ever dreams of attending to anything he says or does. He's as 'daft' as any lunatic in the county asylum.

'And where have you been, Patsy?'

'I've been to meet my young man, ma'am,' says Patsy, with a blush and a smile; 'for you see, it is our harvest-home supper to-night, and if he was to miss it, all the fun of the evening would be gone for me.'

'Naturally! Where is your supper to be held?'

'Up at the big barn in the poplar field. I suppose it would be no use asking ye to join us, ma'am. Likely parson will be there. He mostly looks in at the harvesting suppers.'

'No! Patsy, thank you; I am too tired to-day. Besides, Mr. and Mrs. Bond are in

London, and I have the cottage to look after. But I hope you will have a very pleasant evening, and that your young man will be sure to be there.'

She gets away as soon as she can after that, for she is disappointed at the failure of her afternoon's experiment, and fears lest she may have marred her chances of success by her precipitancy. But as she sits alone in the evening, thinking over these things, it suddenly occurs to her that in all probability old Strother will have gone up to the harvesting supper with his friends, and the coast be once more clear.

She never thought of asking Patsy Kennett whether her grandfather would be included amongst the guests, but it is worth going up to the farm to see if it is the case or no. As soon as this idea strikes Delia, she puts it into execution. It is ten o'clock; but what is ten o'clock for a walk along a

country lane, with the harvest-moon lighting up each object as bright as day ?

When she has traversed half its distance her eye is attracted by something that glitters in the hedgerow. Delia stoops to pick it up, and finds to her astonishment that it is the same glass flask she presented to the old Scotchman that afternoon.

It is like the old man's surly ingratitude to throw it away, she thinks ; but how on earth did it come there ? She holds it in her hand, as she walks on, wondering, but can come to no better conclusion than that Strother may have commissioned some child to fetch him whisky in it, with the money she gave him, and the messenger, cognisant of the old man's weakness of intellect, has been unfaithful to his trust.

But as she reaches the farmhouse another light is thrown upon the circumstance. She is met by the servant Jane—howling loudly,

after the fashion of the lower orders when in distress, and wringing her hands.

‘Gracious heavens!’ exclaims Delia,
‘what is the matter?’



CHAPTER VIII.

HE'S GONE.

'He's gone, mum!' replies Jane, in a fresh succession of howls, and making as though she would rush down the lane. 'He's gone!'

Delia places her hand upon her arm to detain her.

'What do you mean? You mustn't leave me like this. Who's gone?'

'The old gentleman, mum! O! now ye're here, do 'e bide a bit and let I rin down the village arter 'im. If the maister comes home

and finds 'im gone, he'll take all the skin off my back, I know he will.'

'But you can do no good by running wildly about the village. You had much better tell me what is the matter as quietly as you can, and I will see if I can help you. When did the old gentleman go ?'

'That's just what I can't say, mum. Maister and Miss Patsy and the rest of 'em, they went off to the harvesting supper at six o'clock, and left me to take care of the old 'un, here. He'd been so close and sullen since you left this arternoon, that he wouldn't speak to no one ; so I thought as he wor a sulkin' upstairs, I might run out at the back for a minute, jist to git my clean things from mother ; and when I come in again and went to take up his supper he was gone, and I'm clean out of my senses to think what I shall say to maister when he comes home.'

‘But Strother cannot be far off, Jane. He is hiding somewhere in the house or the garden, you may depend upon it. He is too infirm to run away.’

‘Bless you, mum! he can run like a rabbit. It’s only his cunnin’ makes him pretend he can’t move. I mind, once before, when maister had teased him like about this parcel, he took it into his head to scour off, and a fine piece of work there was to find him agen. And that’s why maister’s so perticular he shall never be left alone. The tiresome, provokin’ old piece!’

‘Come with me, Jane! I am sure we shall find him under the bed, or in the wardrobe, or somewhere!’

She drags the girl up to old Strother’s room, but it is completely empty, and what is more, the parcel has disappeared.

‘Why! the parcel is gone!’ exclaims Delia.

‘Then as sure as sure he’s off!’ cries Jane, with another burst of tears, ‘for ’e’s been a-ravin’ about that beastly parcel the whole arternoon, and ’e must have watched me go, and shouldered it, and bin off like a rocket! O! that sich a thing should ever ’ave ’ap-pened to me. I shall never hear the last of it—not if I live to the age of Methoosalums.’

Whilst the servant-girl raves after this fashion, Delia is walking rapidly about the room, searching every corner of it. Then she visits every other apartment in the house, walks the length and breadth of the garden, and looks right and left over the broad fields that surround the farm, shouting Strother’s name in vain. It is evident that he has taken French leave, and the mysterious parcel with him. The raid she committed upon the wrappings that afternoon has frightened the old man into running away. Suddenly Delia remembers the sherry-flask

she picked up from the hedgerow. One thing is evident. Strother must have taken the path that leads down the lane. Now the lane by which she reaches Kennett's farm branches out in two directions; one road intersects the village of Cloverfield, the other runs at the back of it, straight to St. Alders—the nearest town at which there is a railway-station. The old man, with the cunning of insanity, is not likely to have risked recognition and discovery by walking by daylight through the village. He must be hiding, therefore, somewhere on the St. Alders road. In a moment Delia has made up her mind to follow him. Strother's safety, it is to be feared, is of little moment to her, but the precious parcel he carries she will not, if possible, lose sight of.

‘Jane!’ she exclaims, with excitement, ‘the old man is gone—there is no doubt of that—but he cannot have got far without money.’

But here she remembers the five shillings she gave him, and her energy becomes doubled as the fear strikes her that he may already be speeding beyond her reach.

‘You must stay here,’ she continues rapidly to the servant, ‘and I will go in search of him, and bring him back with me if I can!’

‘Oh! and if ye don’t find him and the maister should come home!’ exclaims Jane, wringing her hands in the dreadful anticipation.

‘You must tell him the truth; but say I will do everything that is needful. Good-night; I may be back again sooner than you expect;’ and running, rather than walking, Delia takes her way without further parley down the lane.

As she hurries along, her thoughts are all in confusion, and she is only sure of one thing—

that she must follow after that parcel, if the quest takes her to the other side of the world. But at present she has only to find old Strother, whom she must needs believe is on the St. Alders road, hiding in a ditch, perhaps, or asleep from exhaustion under the hedgerow, weighed down by the burden he insists upon carrying. If she went in a carriage she would miss seeing him, besides she could not use her friend's vehicle for the purpose; so she resolves upon walking. Walking alone at ten o'clock at night over an unfrequented and unfamiliar road, with only the harvest-moon to light her way, seems a formidable undertaking. But Delia has no fear where so great a purpose is at stake. One precaution only will she observe, to scribble a few lines in pencil on the back of a card, and give it to the purblind house-keeper at the rectory, who she knows cannot read, to deliver to Mr. Le Mesurier as soon

as he returns. The rectory stands at the end of the lane, at the corner where the two roads diverge, and as soon as her written message is in safe keeping, Delia strikes off to the left, and walks rapidly in the direction of St. Alders, which lies about three miles from Cloverfield.

The road is almost as bright as day, yet, though her eyes are busy searching every side, they can detect nothing larger than a startled rabbit or hare making its way through the thicket off the queen's highway. Several times she jumps over the ditch that skirts the road on either side, and parts the brambly hedge, at the peril of scratching her eyes out, that she may see if any figure is to be distinguished in the fields beyond ; but all is barren of sight or sound, and she walks so quickly that she has arrived at the little town of St. Alders before she thinks she is half way there. The lights are extinguished

in most of the private houses, for St. Alders is a primitive place, and its residents keep unfashionable hours ; but the railway-station is on the outskirts of the town, and the state of activity it appears to be in emboldens Delia to go straight there and make inquiries for the object of her search. She finds the narrow platform quite crowded with passengers, and a truck full of luggage bars her entrance for the space of half a second. It is evident a train is momentarily expected. As she enters the booking-office, a clerk thrusts his face out at the ticket-window.

‘ Now then, miss — where for ? Winchester, Basingstoke, Waterloo ? ’

‘ No, thank you ! I only came to ask if an old man, very bent and decrepit, and shabbily dressed, with a large parcel, has been seen here this evening ? He has left his home, and his friends are very much distressed about him. ’

‘Don’t know nothink about it, miss; better ask the station-master,’ says the ticket-clerk abruptly, as he bangs down the window.

‘Oh! where *is* the station-master?’ exclaims Delia to every one within hearing.

‘Do you think the lady can mean the little pedlar-looking fellow who carried a box, or summat, on his back, and spoke such broad Scotch, Bill?’ demands an official, who has overheard her conversation, of another.

‘Yes, yes! that is he!’ replied Delia eagerly. ‘An old man, with his hair half red and half white, and with a freckled skin, and velveteen suit. He is mad. I must find out where he’s gone to!’

‘That was he, miss, then, sure enough. He came in here about eight o’clock, looking awfully fagged, and I offered to shift the parcel for him, but he wouldn’t let me touch it. I fancied the old gentleman was cracked,

but he seemed 'cute enough to look after himself.'

Here a deafening bell, heralding the approach of the train, drowns the porter's voice for a minute, and the passengers, pushing forward to secure their places, separate him from Delia. As they come together again, however, her first words are :

'Can you tell me where he is gone ?'

'Well, if so be this was the old gentleman you're in search of, miss, he booked hisself by the 8.10 for Winchester, where he must have been landed full an hour ago.'

'When does the next train leave for Winchester, then ?'

'Why, this here's the Winchester train as is alongside now ! Last one to-night, too—the eleven express to London. She won't stop again now, except at Winchester, and Basingstoke, till she's run through to Waterloo.'

‘Put me in a carriage! I must follow that man at all risks!’

‘You’ll have to look sharp if you want to leave by this train. Have you got your ticket?’

‘I’ll pay at the other end!’ cries Delia, as she leaps into a carriage, the door of which is just about to be closed with a bang, and finds the train at the same moment moving off in the direction of Winchester. As soon as she is beyond the possibility of abandoning her design, Delia sees that she has done a very foolish thing. Who and what on earth is she running after in this senseless manner?

A hasty description, half listened to or understood, and delivered by a man of whose trustworthiness she has not the slightest proof! And even if the porter’s word is to be depended on, what is she to do on arriving in Winchester? She cannot roam the streets

there at night searching for old Strother. Where, then, will she go? Of whom make inquiries?

As she realises the position in which she is placed, Delia feels very much inclined to shed tears. She is disgusted with herself for having committed so hare-brained an action. Women are seldom to be trusted to act on their own responsibility; they are too excitable and impulsive. Even the cleverest and most prudent amongst them require the weight of a man's brain to balance their own.

Men are slower to think, decide, or act than women. They often irritate the lower animal, that walks by instinct rather than by knowledge, by their seeming inactivity and unnecessary forethought. But where one woman gains her cause by impulse—from some happy inspiration, that is to say, that has struck her she does not know how, and

led her on to act she cannot tell why—a hundred lose theirs.

Impulses are, in many instances, divinations ; but it is not every mind to which it is given to divine, nor every mind that can divine that which is given it. But though Delia sees the imprudence of which she has been guilty, she will not regret it yet. She argues that she may be, and probably is, on a wild-goose chase ; but that, had she missed the opportunity offered to her, and it turned out that Strother was in Winchester all the time, she should never have forgiven herself. So she tries to believe she is right, and consoling herself with the idea that, should she be wrong, she will, after all, have done her best, sits bolt upright all the way to Winchester, wondering what Mr. Le Mesurier will think of her midnight escape.

In three-quarters of an hour she finds herself at her destination. As she pays her

railway fare, she tries to extract some information from the ticket-collector, but unsuccessfully : nor does he give her any hope of gaining news through their means. Winchester station is a very different place from St. Alders, and too many passengers come and go to render it possible for the officials to recollect their personal appearance or their destination. Her best plan, he says, guessing her station in life, will be to put up at the George Inn, in High Street, and place her inquiries in the hands of the parish authorities in the morning.

Delia's spirits feel considerably quenched as she finds herself jolting in a ramshackle old fly, of a breed peculiar to cathedral towns, towards the inn in question. She sees that she has probably created a scandal and made a foolish midnight journey for nothing. Such satisfaction as she is likely to acquire from it would have been as easily

gained by letter. In what way is she to set about her business in the morning? There is no one to guide or direct her. She feels utterly lost and out of conceit with herself and the world in general.

The night-porter receives her in the hall of the George Inn, although the house is not yet shut up. As she is slowly ascending the staircase, following on the heels of a sleepy chambermaid, who has been summoned to conduct her to her apartment, the sound of voices reaches her ear through the half-opened door of a public billiard-room, in which a company of gentlemen sit smoking and talking together.

A sudden pang shoots through Delia, and she stops for a moment and presses her hand against her heart. Some one has laughed—a low, sad laugh, very unlike the joyous ring of her boy's voice, and yet the tone reminds her of Angus. The pain it engenders,

though sharp, is salutary. It infuses fresh courage to her half-fainting spirit, by recalling the purpose for which she has placed herself in so unpleasant a position. Whatever the upshot may be, she can never lament a rashness which has been undertaken for the sake of her son.

‘I am glad I am here,’ she keeps on repeating to herself as she prepares for rest; ‘very, very glad. And until I am convinced that Strother never came in this direction at all, I shall continue to be glad.’

So she sleeps well and peacefully. But she is up with the morning’s light. By that time she has decided what to do. She will take the earliest opportunity of laying the whole case before a magistrate, boldly charge the old clerk with robbery of the vestry-books, and demand that a proper search be made for him, and an investigation of the parcel that he carries.

But help comes to her before she has had time to act. As she sits at breakfast, a card is put into her hand, which is inscribed, to her surprise, with the name of 'Le Mesurier.'

In another moment the friends are together.

'Is it really my business that has brought you over here?' cries Delia. 'How good and kind of you! I never thought my message would have had such an effect.'

'What other effect did you anticipate, Mrs. Manners?' When I returned home last night and received your card, I considered it my duty at once to follow and offer you my protection. What can you mean by running about the country, at dead of night, in this harumscarum way? What good did you expect to do by it?

'I do not know; but I traced Strother to Winchester, and I felt that I must follow

him. How did you ascertain that I was here ?

‘ As soon as I got your message, I walked after you to St. Alders ; but the station was closed. So I sat there till the morning and came on by the first train. The porters told me all about you and the “ Scotch pedlar ” you were inquiring after, so I knew I was on the right track. And once at Winchester, it was easy to guess I should find you at the George Inn. Everybody who comes to Winchester goes to the “ George.” ’

‘ O ! Mr. Le Mesurier, do you think we shall find him ? ’

‘ Sooner or later, there is no doubt we shall ; but I question whether we can do much in a day. What are your plans ? ’

She tells him of her desire to consult a magistrate, and he considers it the best thing she can do.

‘ But be advised by me. Let me save

you the trouble of walking all over the town for nothing. Rest quietly here, and I will go out and make the necessary inquiries. Then, if your presence is required, I will return and fetch you. Is it agreed ?

‘I will do anything you think best,’ says Delia, and the parson leaves her at once.

But after he is gone, she comes to the conclusion that she has been very selfish. Why should she let this man, on whom she has not the slightest claim, run about after her business, whilst she sits idle in the hotel ? She looks from the window upon the principal street of the town. It is a quiet, sleepy-looking place enough, with but few passengers. If the old man is here, she is just as likely to see him on that deserted pavement as in the high-road of Cloverfield. What if she should be missing the very opportunity she is striving for, by sitting idly indoors ? So she puts on her walking attire and saun-

ters into the street. It is not cattle-market day, consequently there is little life stirring in its quiet lengths. Two or three citizens gently ambling to their offices or their shops ; two or three nursemaids airing their respective charges ; two or three children on their way to school—such are the varieties that people the High Street of Winchester. There is a cawing of rooks to be heard from the Close, near at hand ; and lured by the sound, and the reports she has heard of the beauty of the grand old cathedral, Delia turns her feet after a while in that direction, and passing under the arch of St. Crispin, finds herself in one of those solemn, peaceful enclosures that surround most of the ancient ecclesiastical edifices in England. It seems as though in a moment she had passed out of the working world into a city of the dead ; and she sits down on a flat tombstone, almost awestruck by the thought

and the feeling it brings with it. Not every one, though, is of the same opinion on entering the Cathedral Close. Two dirty urchins are playing ring-taw on a stone slab close to her, whilst a third is making the welkin ring with his melancholy howls.

‘What are ye cryin’ for, Bill?’ demands one of his companions at last, impatiently.

‘Mother’s ’it me!’

‘Why for?’

‘’Cause I stoned an old beggar on Martyrs’ Worthy Road.’

‘What beggar?’

‘An old thief with a pack. I tried to hustle ’is pack, and ’e growled at me, so I ’it ’im with a stone; and then one of them wimmin in a black gound and a white cap come out of Brushwood Farm and black-guarded me, and I tried to ’it ’er; and she tuk ’old of me and led me ’ome to mother, and got ’er to wallop me. And ain’t she

done it neither?' continues the boy, as he rubs the seat of his corduroy breeches and laments anew.

Delia is listening to the recital with all her ears.

'What's the good of 'itting a beggar for nothin'?' demands one of the young philosophers engaged in ring-taw.

'Twarn't for nothin'. I wanted a bit, of the leather off 'is pack to cover my ball. So I just give a grab at it, and the old feller come arter me; so I threw stones at 'im. But I got the bit of leather,' he adds, with a sly grin of satisfaction, as he thrusts his hand into his pocket.

The treasure comes to light! It is a morsel of worn American cloth, just like that which covers old Strother's parcel.

Delia trembles all over at the sight.

'Come here, boy!' she says to the blubbering urchin, 'I want to speak to you.'

The child appears very shy of coming within the range of her hand. Perhaps he anticipates another cuff; but the sight of a shilling has a wonderful effect in clearing up his doubts and allaying his fears.

‘Be that for me?’ he asks cautiously.

‘It shall be yours if you will answer me a few questions.’

At this wonderful announcement, all three lads stay their occupations, and gather round her.

‘What was this old beggar like, and where did you see him?’

‘He wore a little un, all crumped up like, with white ’air, and a big pack on ’is back; and I see’d ’im on the Martyrs’ Worthy Road ’alf an hour ago.’

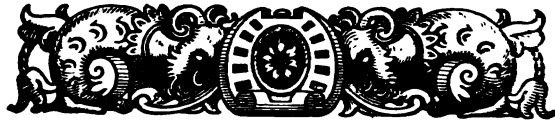
‘If I give you this shilling will you take me to him?’ says Delia eagerly.

‘We’ll all take you to ’im, mum,’ cry the boys simultaneously, as, forgetful of tears

and whippings and ring-taw, they prepare to form themselves into a guard of honour for the lady who has shillings with which to reward their services.

Delia tears a leaf from her pocket-book, and writes on it, 'Follow me to Brushwood Farm, on the Martyrs' Worthy Road;' then rising, she leaves it at the George Inn door for Mr. Le Mesurier, and prepares to follow her young guides wherever they may lead her.

She has found the old clerk again. She feels sure and certain that she has found him.



CHAPTER IX.

‘ADELA! IS IT YOU?’

THE Martyrs’ Worthy Road appears to be a long way off to Delia, dragged there hurriedly as she is by her impetuous little outriders.

‘This is the shortest cut, mum,’ cries one.

‘No, Bill, ’taint. The lady must go up Mark Lane,’ contradicts his brother.

‘She’d much better keep to the ’Igh Street, and turn when I tells ’er,’ ejaculated the third.

‘I don’t care which way I go, so that you

take me there as quickly as possible,' says Delia in her turn.

On the road she makes the whipped boy repeat, again and again, his description of the old beggar.

'And who was the woman who took you to your mother?' she asks presently.

'She's a beast! that's what she is,' replies the urchin determinately.

'I knows 'er,' says one of the others; 'she's staying with Farmer Coombes at Martyrs' Worthy. She's what they calls a "sister!"'

'I'd like to "sister" 'er,' interpolates the injured boy.

'But what became of the old man when the "sister" took you home?' says Delia.

'O! she took 'im into the farm'ouse fust, and she's there with him now, I'll lay. I won't go nigh 'er, for one.'

'I shall not ask you to do so. Only show

me the house, and you shall have your shilling and be off. *What* name did you say ?

‘Farmer Coombes, of the Brushwood Farm.’

Coombes !—Coombes ! Where has she heard that name before ? She has scarcely time to ask herself the question, before she is there.

It is a large, spacious house, much added to and improved by modern skill, the house of a gentleman farmer rather than the everyday, business-like residence she had expected to see. But here, having arrived at her journey’s end, and the little lads being quite certain that the ‘woman with the cap’ took the ‘old beggar’ in there, she dismisses them with a shilling apiece, in the possession of which they run shouting back to the sweet-stuff shop. At another time Delia might have felt timid of intruding upon the privacy

of strangers, but now she feels no repugnance, no fear, only the intensest desire to learn if her surmises are correct. She walks straight up to the hall-door of the Brushwood Farm, and rings the bell. It is answered by a country maid.

‘I beg your pardon,’ commences Delia in her sweet low voice, which even excitement is powerless to render coarse or common, ‘but is there an old beggar man anywhere on your premises—an old Scotchman, with a pack upon his back?’

The girl stares at her.

‘I think you’d better see the sister,’ she replies.

She ushers Delia into a sitting-room, where in a few moments she is joined by a lady in the garb of a Sister of Mercy; a lady in every sense of the word, from the calm yet respectful manner in which she receives her visitor, to the courtesy with which

she enters the room and demands the stranger's business.

'I hope I am not taking a great liberty,' says Delia, 'but I have been told that you have a poor old man under your roof—one whom you saw being stoned by some rough little urchin—and as I have come to Winchester solely in search of such a person, I considered myself entitled to make inquiries of you.'

'Your end justifies the means,' returns the sister gravely, bowing her head. 'It is true that we have offered shelter to such a poor old creature as you describe, but I must know more before I can identify him with the person of whom you are in search!'

'The man I mean is a Scotchman—very old and decrepit—not quite right, moreover, in his mind. He has white hair, and a freckled skin—wears a velveteen suit, and had

a large parcel on his back containing books of great value.'

'It has not been our province to examine the contents of his luggage, madam, but as far as the remainder of your description goes, I think I may say that it tallies with the stranger at present under our roof. But pardon me for asking if this poor old creature's condition is of any moment to you.'

Delia blushes.

'I will be frank with you. His personal safety is of no more moment to me than that of any other old man; but the contents of the parcel he has carried away with him——'

'I see! Then I need have no hesitation in telling you that he is in a very critical condition. He had a fit outside our house, which was the reason I had him carried in, and the doctor, who is with him now, thinks very badly of him.'

‘O! how I wish Mr. Le Mesurier were here!’ cries Delia impulsively.

The sister starts and looks at her earnestly. The action causes Delia to regard her in return. She is a very pretty woman, notwithstanding her unbecoming dress, and cannot have seen more than five-and-thirty years. But there are traces of past pain or sorrow upon her face which no comfort arising from the knowledge that she is leading a pure and religious life has had the power to efface.

‘Would you like to see the old man? He is unconscious, but it may be a satisfaction to you,’ says the sister, after a pause.

‘No, thank you. I would rather wait. But it would be a comfort to me to explain the reason of my presence here to you.’

And thereupon Delia discloses as much of her past history as is necessary to account for her present interest in old Strother, and the

sister listens, as it is her mission to do, with all a woman's sympathy.

'There is no doubt that, under the circumstances, we shall be justified in searching the contents of his parcel,' she replies; 'and how sincerely I hope it may prove to contain what you are looking for! You must have suffered greatly. Heaven send you the reward of your patience and affection!'

Delia's eyes fill with tears.

'We all suffer in this world,' she says gently, 'some at the beginning of life—others at the close. I shall never believe but that God's mercies and judgments are meted out equally to His creatures. Forgive me for saying that I am not so dull as to suppose that you have escaped the common lot yourself.'

The sister colours with pain.

'My troubles,' she answers, 'differ from yours only in kind. I, too, brought them on my own head, and by an unpardonable deceit,

which, like all deceit, involved another's happiness as well as mine.'

'A tendency to deceive is the prevailing weakness of our sex,' says Delia. 'As sure as Heaven brings me out of this fearful dilemma, I will endure any shame or loss rather than permit one word that is not perfectly true to escape my lips again.'

'Ah! my friend, we are all ready to shut the stable-door when the steed is stolen beyond recall. I would wipe out the history of my youth's error with my blood, if I could; yet I know it will follow me to the brink of the grave!'

At this moment the servant thrusts her head into the opened doorway.

'If you please, sister, there's a strange genelman wants to see yer.'

'Perhaps it is my friend,' suggests Delia; and at the sound of her voice, Mr. Le Mesurier steps forward, saying:

‘According to your directions, Mrs. Manners, I have——’

But as he has got so far, a low cry from the Sister of Mercy arrests his sentence, and he turns hastily to confront her startled face. At that sight, all composure deserts him. Delia, watching his countenance, sees it change with the rapidity of lightning, as a dozen conflicting feelings pass over it in quick succession; then he darts forward, as though to clasp the stranger in his arms, but checks himself suddenly, to exclaim in a low voice of bewildered surprise :

‘Adela! is it you?’

‘Yes! yes! it is I. But this meeting, as you must suppose, was completely unpremeditated. Now, let me go, without further questioning.’

She attempts to leave the room, but he bars her exit.

‘I cannot let you go without an explana-

tion! For fourteen years we have been separated, and my existence has been a living grave without you. I have tried to overcome my love for you, without success; and now that we have met again, if the past can never be renewed, at least let me have the privilege of counting you amongst my friends.'

'It cannot be. You ask what is impossible. I am not worthy.'

'Have our miserable separated lives, then, had no power to wash out unworthiness? You know how mine has been spent. I see now how you have employed yours. I have forgiven. Let us both strive to forget.'

'No forgetfulness can wash out crime,' she answers.

'Mr. Le Mesurier! had I not better leave the room?' asks Delia, to whom this scene, though inexplicable, is becoming very painful.

'No! do not leave us. Adela! this lady

has been one of my best friends. To her I have been able to confide a little of the trouble which I have borne silently for so many years, and she has sympathised with and pitied me. She will tell you how, in consequence of our sad separation, my conduct has been misunderstood and maligned, and my life compelled to be solitary and loveless. She too has known sorrow for herself. Shall she quit the room, or shall she stay and hear what I have to say to you ?

‘Let her stay ! I can trust her as I would yourself.’

‘Mrs. Manners,’ continues Le Mesurier, ‘when you were looking over the vestry-books of Cloverfield parish last week, you came upon the entry of a marriage between John Le Mesurier and Adela Coombes which took place fifteen years ago in that very church, and which I begged you to keep

a secret for my sake. That entry referred to the union of this lady and myself.'

'She is your wife!' exclaims Delia.

'I *was*,' says the sister sadly.

'You *are*—you ever must be, at least in my opinion,' replies Mr. Le Mesurier. 'Fifteen years ago then, I was staying at Southampton, reading for holy orders, when I met Adela Coombes, who was a teacher at a school. She had had the misfortune to have a very unhappy home, and——'

Here the sister, who has been struggling between a desire to atone for the past by a humble confession, and the natural feeling of shame which forbids her making it in the presence of a stranger, takes the words out of Mr. Le Mesurier's mouth.

'John—John! let me tell the story. There is no disgrace too great for such a woman as I have been. Madam!' she continues, turn-

ing towards Delia, ' I told you but just now that the blight of my life had been effected by an unpardonable deceit. The deceit involved an unpardonable imprudence. As a young girl I had, it must be confessed, a most unhappy home, and to escape its discomforts I eloped from it, at the age of sixteen, with the mate of a merchant vessel, a man I had only seen some half a dozen times. I was married, and lived with him at Southampton for a while until he went to sea again, when his ship was wrecked and all hands reported lost. I did not grieve for him—he had been too little to me ; and when I met Mr. Le Mesurier, and learned that he loved me, I was too elated to care for anything else. I was supporting myself then as a teacher in a school. I had entered there under my maiden name, and I never undeceived John in the matter, but kept the fact of my first marriage a secret from him.

After we had been acquainted a few months, he proposed to me that we should be married privately. He was his own master, but he did not wish his family to hear the news all at once. So we were married at the little village of Cloverfield, and for awhile we were happy—quite—quite happy !’

‘ *I was, God knows !* ’ interpolates Le Mesurier, in a voice of deep feeling.

‘ Then came my awful temptation and fall. The news reached me in a roundabout way that my first husband had been saved from the wreck, and was doing his best to trace me. I suffered the tortures of hell, but I never told John. I *knew* that as soon as he heard it, we should be forced to separate.’

‘ My poor Adela !’

‘ But I betrayed the truth, spite of myself. John was interested in mesmerism at that time. He studied the science deeply, and I

was the patient on whom he made his chief experiments. I did not know the extent of the power he held over me, and he thought his wife could have no secrets, worthy of the name, from him. So one day, when I was under the influence, he commanded me to speak what was in my mind. I obeyed him—and he learned everything! Then there came a terrible awakening—and all was over between us.’

‘You went back to your first husband?’ says Delia, who is intensely interested in the story of her poor friend’s life.

‘No!’ with a shudder; ‘thank God, *that* was never required of me. But he found me out, or rather his friends did, and I nursed him—he had been fearfully injured and crippled in the course of the hardships he had undergone—until he went to his rest.’

think of anything so imprudent. He is a clergyman, beloved, I am sure, and looked up to in his parish, and I am not fit to be his wife, for the past shame must ever cling to me. Pray—pray tell him that the best thing he can do is to forget that he has ever met me again.'

'Indeed, I shall tell him no such thing, Adela, for I know that your loss has been a lifelong sorrow to him, and I believe that your re-union will prove to be the happiest thing in the world for you both.'

'We *were* so very, very happy together,' she says, through her tears.

'And so you will be again. Mr. Le Mesurier, I heartily congratulate you on your good fortune. And you so fully deserve it. If it had not been for your generous friendship for me, and sympathy in my trials, you would not have been here to-day to find your long-lost treasure again. Adela! if you love

him still, make him happy ! His life has been a wasted one for want of you.'

'O ! John, can you forgive me ? is it possible you can love me still ?' says Adela.

She is answered by the stealing of an arm about her waist. Delia rises hastily and walks to the window. She is rejoicing with the most unselfish joy over the new-born happiness of her friend, and she will not be witness to the sacred kiss that heralds it.

But when the whispering, and the happy tears, and the embraces, so long missed between these two, have somewhat abated, Delia turns towards the re-united lovers with a happy laugh.

'Fancy ! our all meeting in this extraordinary manner in a house which we never saw until to-day ! It is the most wonderful chance I ever heard of.'

'There is no such thing as chance, I believe, in this world,' says Adela, smiling ; 'but it is

nevertheless a wonder—one of the happy surprises Heaven sometimes sends us, as it sends the sun to shine upon the earth when there has been sufficient rain. This is my uncle's house, but I have only been here for ten days. My usual work lies in London, but I came down here to nurse my aunt, who has broken her arm.'

'And your future work, love, will be in Cloverfield—the parish which I accepted only because it was connected with thoughts of you!'

'Yes, dearest!' she answers, with quiet content, 'as soon as my work here is finished, I will come to Cloverfield whenever you desire it!'

At this juncture a knock sounds upon the door, and Adela has hardly had time to disengage herself from Le Mesurier's encircling arm, when the doctor, who has been called in to attend old Strother, enters the room.

‘I beg your pardon, sister, but if you are at leisure I should like to speak to you for a moment.’

‘You can speak to me with the greatest confidence here, doctor. This lady and gentleman are my friends, and interested in the fate of your poor patient. Pray how is he going on? Has he yet recovered his consciousness?’

‘He has not recovered it! It is of him I wish to speak to you. I regret to say that he is dead!’

Dead! The word falls with chilling effect upon all present. Death is an awful thing even when it is presented to us in the person of an imbecile and worn-out pauper.

‘I should like to identify the body,’ says Mr. Le Mesurier.

They follow the doctor silently and reverently to the chamber where poor old Strother was conveyed; and there, on a bed, they

find the body of the Chilton clerk, dressed as they discovered him, with his arms fondly extended over the precious package that caused his death.

‘Is any one aware of the contents of the parcel the poor old fellow carried?’ demands the doctor, ‘for he appeared to be very particular about it. The only signs of sense he betrayed were when we attempted to take it away from his side; and he died, as you see, in an attempt to enfold it in his arms. Yet I should hardly imagine, from its appearance, that it contained anything more valuable than old rags, or stones.’

‘It is in order to discover the true contents of that parcel that I have been put to the trouble of following the poor old man to Winchester, doctor,’ says Le Mesurier; ‘and with your permission we will at once proceed to take note of what we may find in it. I am sure you will trust me to do what is

just and right in the matter, when I tell you that I am the Vicar of Cloverfield.'

So saying, Le Mesurier shouldered the mysterious parcel and carries it into the next room.



CHAPTER X.

‘I AM THE HAPPIEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD.’

MRS. HEPHZIBAH told Delia, when she was going to London, that she intended to make ‘short work’ of Bob’s affairs, and so she does ; indeed, Mr. Robert Bond has perhaps never been more astonished in his life than he is by the aptitude his step-mother displays for settling an unpleasant business with railroad-speed. She has not been in town an hour before he is compelled to make a clear statement of his liabilities, and give a written promise that if they are defrayed

he shall never expect to receive assistance from his father again. As for Mrs. Bob, she undergoes such a talking to, that, as she informs her husband afterwards, she would rather go without a dress to her back for the remainder of her life than run the risk of encountering such another.

Mr. Bond, as may be supposed, takes but a feeble share in the proceedings. He is evidently of the opinion that it is useless to keep a watch-dog and bark yourself. So he lets his wife do all the barking, only dutifully chiming in with an acquiescence when referred to, and sits by, an attentive listener, thinking, as he always has done, that Mrs. Hephzibah is the most wonderful woman in the world, and he the luckiest of men to have secured her for himself.

The business which brought them to London being so satisfactorily and adroitly settled, there does not seem any further reason for

Mr. and Mrs. Bond to remain absent from home. Neither of them care for theatres or concert-halls—they have even outgrown their proclivity for perambulating picture-galleries, or roaming about botanical gardens. The season is long past, everybody is out of town, and the streets look dusty and deserted.

Three or four days after their arrival, therefore, Mrs. Hephzibah suddenly propounds the question to her husband over the breakfast-table, why they remain there any longer.

‘I’m sure I don’t know, my dear,’ replies the meek little man.

‘I’ll tell you, then ; because we’re a couple of fools. You haven’t got a single thing left to do here, neither have I. All our friends are away, and we are being openly robbed every hour in a nasty, fusty, second-rate hotel, when we have a charming cottage of

our own standing empty in the country. I'll close our boxes the first thing after breakfast, and we'll go back to Cloverfield by the twelve o'clock train.'

'By all means, my dear,' says the obedient Mr. Bond.

And the journey is carried out as proposed, which brings them home on the afternoon of the very day on which old Strother died at Brushwood Farm.

Not having sent word of their intended return, Mr. and Mrs. Bond are compelled to dispense with the comforts of their own pony-carriage, and hire a fly to convey them from St. Alders to Cloverfield. As it stops before the door of the cottage, and the parlour-maid comes running out to let down the window, they can see by the expression of her face that her master and mistress are the last people she expected to find in it.

'This is a surprise for you, Ellen, is it not?'

says Mrs. Hephzibah, as she descends from the vehicle.

‘It is indeed, ma’am ! I made sure it was Mrs. Manners come back.’

‘Mrs. Manners ! Why, is she from home ?’

‘Yes, ma’am ; and Mary and me, we have been in such a state we haven’t known what to do with ourselves. I’m sure it’s ten thousand blessings you and master have come, for Mrs. Manners has been missing ever since last evening, and we can’t think whatever’s gone of her !’

‘*Missing !* what nonsense ! Didn’t she sleep at home ?’

‘No, ma’am ! and nobody’s seen her neither. I’m sure we’ve been into every house in the village to make inquiries. She had her tea last evening as usual, but when I went up to tell her supper was ready I couldn’t find her nowheres, and she’s never been home since.’

‘This is very extraordinary,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah, turning pale. ‘William, come into the parlour. I want to speak to you.’

When she has got beyond the reach of the ears of the domestics, she says :

‘Take my word for it, Delia’s gone back to that boy.’

‘That seems very unlikely, my dear. Why, I thought the only reason she came here was to hide from him.’

‘I know it, but she has had our society since ; that has diverted her thoughts a little. I should never have left her, William. As soon as she found herself alone, poor thing, she got brooding ; and then the fit seized her to see him again, and she is off to Bruges. I am sure that I am right.’

‘Well, it is rather inconsiderate of her, I think, considering that we left her in charge of the house. I thought she made you

such faithful promises not to lose sight of it.'

Mrs. Hephzibah sighs. She is very much disappointed. Still, she will not blame Delia more than is needful. She feels sure that to the mystery is attached no wrong.

'But it is a cheerless coming home,' she says sadly.

'Am I intruding?' exclaims a sharp voice at the door.

It is that of Mrs. Wilson, the doctor's wife, the lady against whose gossiping propensities Mrs. Bond inveighed so strongly a few weeks ago.

'I guessed you had returned by seeing the fly stand before the door with the luggage, so I thought I would just pop in to tell you the news. Isn't it a dreadful thing—but perhaps you have already heard it.'

'We have heard nothing! We have only just arrived,' replies Mrs. Hephzibah stiffly.

‘No? That’s strange! I should have thought the story was all over St. Alders by this time. About Mr. Le Mesurier, I mean. Ah! I told you what an eccentric person he is, and how many queer stories have floated about concerning him. And now he’s run away.’

‘Run away! Impossible!’

‘Well, then, ask my husband; but any one will tell you it is the truth. It seems that he was at the Kennetts’ harvest-home supper last night, but he was never seen afterwards. Kennett is in some trouble about that old man Strother, I think, and he sent down the first thing this morning to consult Mr. Le Mesurier; but he left home last evening, and his housekeeper knows nothing of where he went, nor why. Very extraordinary behaviour on the part of a parson, isn’t it? Dr. Wilson says he should never be surprised to hear that he had made away with himself. He

is so very eccentric and unlike other people.'

'What folly! Excuse my plain speaking, Mrs. Wilson, but I must say so. The poor man is most likely watching by the bedside of some sick or dying person. Is he to account to the parish for the way in which he spends every hour?'

'Oh! of course, it is easy to defend him; and we all know Mr. Le Mesurier is a favourite at the cottage, Mrs. Bond. Only I fancy my husband knows more about the sick and dying in Cloverfield than their parson does, and *he* says he was nowhere in the village this morning.'

'He has left it then, doubtless, on his own business. I hate all tattle and gossip, Mrs. Wilson.'

'Well, perhaps I had better take my leave, then. I am sorry I intruded,' says the doctor's wife, in an offended tone.

'I am sorry you did,' repeats Mrs. Bond.

And the ladies part at daggers drawn with one another.

‘William!’ cries Mrs. Hephzibah, as soon as her visitor’s back is turned, ‘I retract my opinion concerning Delia’s absence. She has not gone to see Angus. It is much worse than that! She has eloped with that Le Mesurier.’

‘My dear! what will you say next!’

‘There is nothing more to say! It is as plain as a pikestaff, and I have seen it all along; although I never thought she would have made such an idiot of herself at the last. What can be more self-evident? They are both missing at the same moment! If you don’t want to accuse Delia of conduct such as I am sure she would never be guilty of, they can but have left Cloverfield to get married to each other.’

‘But did they want to marry each other?’

‘Bless me! how blind you are! You

remind me more of the days when you used to sit blinking in that stuffy little office of yours, this evening, than you have done since we were married. Any one but a man could have seen they were falling in love ! What do you suppose all that reading the same books, and walking together and visiting the poor meant, if it didn't mean that ? Why, I spoke to Delia about it the very day we left. And she denied it *in toto*. But of course that's a woman all over. Give her the smallest opportunity to tell a lie, and she will seize it as a cat seizes a rat. Only, I thought better of Delia. And at her age, too ! Why, she's forty if she's a day.'

'No ! no ! my dear ! Only thirty-eight !'

'Take her part, of course—if it's only to contradict me ! You'll say next that it's quite as reasonable of her to plan an elopement like a silly miss of eighteen, as to be married in broad daylight like a sensible woman.'

What was to prevent her marrying the man if she wished it? She's her own mistress! And now she's sunk herself in my opinion for ever.'

'Hadn't we better wait to make a decision until we hear that she is married?' suggests Mr. Bond.

But Mrs. Hephzibah is in too bad a temper to be reasoned with. She walks out of the room without deigning to answer him, and slams the door after her. And then she goes up to her own chamber and fastens herself in, and gives vent to a long fit of weeping. She loves Delia very dearly, and this news has been a great shock to her. It has upset the equilibrium of her mind, and rendered her incapable of exercising her usual fair judgment.

Her good little husband leaves her to herself. Blessed are both the men and the women who know when to leave even their

dearest and best friends to themselves. They are the salt of the earth who help to keep life's unions sweet. But yet Mr. Bond is not idle. He busies himself in urging the servants to prepare a comfortable meal for them, and an hour afterwards, when it is ready, he goes softly upstairs and knocks at the door of his wife's room.

‘Who’s there?’ demands Mrs. Hephzibah sharply.

‘It is I, my dear,’ he answers, in his usual tone; ‘and I have come to tell you that dinner is ready.’

‘I don’t want any dinner, thank you!’

‘Then come and carve for me whilst I eat mine.’

The kind voice vanquishes the remnant of her ill-temper. What has the poor ‘little old man’ done that she should visit Delia’s offence upon him? Mrs. Hephzibah’s better feelings rise to the surface, and she descends

without further parley. There the evident care and forethought which has been employed to make her comfortable smite her with a sense of her own injustice, and she is very nearly lowering herself by kissing William before the housemaid.

‘I am a brute!’ she says roughly, as soon as they are alone together; ‘and you are an angel, William. I have thought a great deal too much of myself since our marriage, and far too little of you. But you have taught me my own deficiency to-day, and I mean to profit by the lesson. I feel almost glad now that Delia has left us. I shall take my proper place as your housekeeper and general attendant, and not be too fine to look after my own kitchen and pantry.’

‘My dear! I couldn’t think of allowing you to employ your talents in so mean an occupation. Your brain was intended for much greater things. If Mrs. Manners does

not return to us, I shall procure you another housekeeper.'

'You will do no such thing, William ! If she comes back or not, your wife will look after your house and table for the future. I am not a baby ; and when I have made up my mind to do a thing, I do it !'

It is scarcely necessary for Mrs. Hephzibah to make the assertion that she is not a baby, but any one who had peeped in upon the old people during the remainder of their little meal might have dubbed them a couple of infants, to judge from the foolish things they said to one another.

Ah ! love is very sweet and very simple, let it come at what age it may ! And there are some hearts that can never feel it at all, and others — happy, happy hearts ! — who foretaste heaven, that can warm up beneath its influence to the last day of their lives.

But Mr. and Mrs. Bond do not finish their meal nor their love-making without an interruption. As they are sitting over their coffee and their simple dessert together, Ellen enters with the intelligence that two strange gentlemen are in the drawing-room, waiting to speak to her mistress.

‘O my God! they bring me some bad news of Delia!’ cries Mrs. Bond, as she stumbles to her feet, and rushes precipitately to the drawing-room, where, to her utter amazement, she is confronted by Angus Moray and the Baron Gustave Saxe. It is difficult to say which of the three is most astonished.

Mrs. Hephzibah is, at least, the first to speak.

‘Do you bring me tidings of your mother?’ she exclaims.

‘*My mother!*’ echoes Angus Moray. ‘Why, merciful Heavens! it is Mrs. Horton!’

‘Madame,’ he continues rapidly, ‘*where* is my mother? Is she not with you? Do you know of her address? I have been trying in vain to find both you and her since coming to England. And now to think that we should have met thus!’

‘Who told you I lived here?’ demands Mrs. Hephzibah in her turn.

‘We did not know it. This is a complete surprise to both the Baron and myself. But, madame, in mercy, tell me, is my dear mother here?’

‘She is *not* here, Mr. Moray.’

‘You cannot give me her address?’

‘I cannot!’

Both the men look grave. Angus once more breaks the silence.

‘My good friend here, who has been as a brother in all my troubles, left Bruges with me for the express purpose of searching for my poor mother.’

‘You are not married, then, to Mademoiselle de Blois?’

‘No; nor never shall be, until my mother’s pure fame is righted,’ replies the young man proudly. ‘The baron and I, after some wanderings on the Continent, crossed to England, and being unable to trace my mother’s name in London, we went up to the place in Berwick where she was married, to make inquiries about the burning of the church there, and the people who remembered it. But every one of consequence is dead. After much trouble, however, we ascertained that the old man who had been clerk at that time had gone to England to live with his friends; that his name was Simon Strother, and that he was staying at a farmhouse at Cloverfield. So we made all haste here. When we arrived, being utter strangers, we went first to the clergyman’s house, to see if he could direct us aright; but we found he had left

home yesterday. His housekeeper told us, however, that there was a lady living at this house who visited a great deal amongst the poor, and she thought she might be able to tell us what we wished to know. So we came here, little thinking that we should find an old friend. And now you cannot tell me one word of my dear mother! What awful mystery has she wrapped about herself? Where, in Heaven's name! can she be hidden?

'If you had asked me that question yesterday, Angus Moray, I could have answered you—*under this roof!*'

'Here, in this very house! Baron, this is indeed joyful intelligence! But you can surely tell me, then, where she has gone?'

'I cannot! I wish I could.'

'Madame! you frighten me!'

'Because I am frightened myself! You have not heard, perhaps, that I have changed

my name since I last saw you,' says Mrs. Hephzibah, with a desperate effort to appear unconcerned and easy at telling a piece of news that always makes her feel uncomfortable. 'I am Mrs. Bond now, and when my husband and I came to live down here, your mother came with us, under the name of Manners.'

'I know you have always been esteemed as her best friend, madame, but how in that case could you have aided her to hide herself from me—the creature she loves best in all the world! It was cruelty to separate us!'

'We may have our different opinions upon that score, Mr. Moray. However, the fact is, that she wished it, and I did so aid her. And a week ago Mr. Bond and I went to town on business, leaving her in charge of the house. She promised me she wouldn't quit it, but she broke her promise. We came

home this afternoon to find her gone—no one can say where. It is altogether a most unpleasant mystery, and I know no more of it than I have told you.'

'She must have gone back to Bruges!' exclaims Angus. 'Baron, shall we follow her there?'

'I wouldn't be in too great a hurry if I were you,' responds Mrs. Hephzibah dryly, 'because there is another side to the matter. I thought the same as you do at first, but I've altered my opinion. The fact is, your mother has been very intimate since coming here with a parson of the name of Le Mesurier, and it is a strange coincidence that he disappeared from Cloverfield last evening at the same time as she did.'

'Do you mean to insinuate, madame——' commences Angus excitedly.

'I don't mean to insinuate anything, but my own belief is that by this time she is Mrs.

Le Mesurier. It is a most stupid way of doing things, and I shall never have the same respect for your mother that I had; still, she has a right to order her own affairs, and the man is well enough as men go, so I dare say she might have done worse than marry him !

At this juncture, the baron, who has been listening attentively to the conversation hitherto, pulling his long chestnut moustaches in silence, becomes visibly agitated.

‘Angus, *mon cher*, it is impossible ! it cannot be. You know that I spoke to your dear mother the very night she quitted us. I told her of my love, and in a measure she did not deny that she returned it. She cannot have changed so soon — so very soon ! Is it likely ? is it probable ? Say, *mon cher*, that you do not believe this story.’

‘Baron, I don’t know what to believe ; but

if it proves to be true I shall be completely miserable.'

'I don't see why you should say that, remarks Mrs. Hephzibah.

'Because, madame, this good friend of mine, who has done my mother the honour of offering her his hand, made this journey to England and brought me with him, at his own expense, with the sole intention of renewing his proposals in whatever condition he found her. He has been more than a father or an elder brother in his kindness and generosity to me, and I cannot but feel bitterly disappointed if on arriving at the end of our search, I find that my poor mother has thrown away all the advantages waiting for her, for the sake of some hasty and ill-considered attachment. But she was in despair, and women are not themselves under such circumstances.'

'She has certainly felt the whole business

terribly. Dr. de Blois and that brute of an uncle of yours have much to answer for.'

'Of my uncle I know, and wish to know, nothing. He tendered me his assistance after my mother's flight, and I rejected it with the scorn it deserved. But Dr. de Blois has sorely repented of the share he took in the transaction. Only this morning I received a letter from him entreating me to return to Bruges and let things be as they were between us. I have answered it, saying that as soon as I have found my mother I will return ; but if what you surmise is true, it will be a sorrowful day for me, who hoped so earnestly to have travelled back in the company of the Baron and Baronne Saxe.'

'I don't think there's much chance of that,' growls Mrs. Hephzibah.

Her kind heart is sorely grieved to see the emotion displayed by her two hearers, for

Angus Moray has cast himself despairingly upon the sofa, whilst the poor baron, unwilling to betray his weakness, is looking out of the window, whilst he tries with all his might to maintain the composure necessary for his dignity as a man. But she is so convinced of the truth of her own suspicions, that she considers it would be worse than cruelty to buoy up her visitors with fallacious hopes. So she is again repeating :

‘ If poor Delia ever becomes Baronne Saxe, I’ll eat my husband’s hat and himself into the bargain,’ when voices—loud and cheerful voices—make themselves distinctly heard upon the step of the open hall-door.

‘ Home at last ! Won’t you come in ? O yes ! you must. No ; I won’t give up my precious burthen for anything. You may take the two others if you choose, but I shall keep this one. I couldn’t sleep with-

out it, indeed I couldn't; I should dream it was gone again, and wake up to believe my dream was true. I'll kill you if you try to touch it,' continues the merry voice with a burst of innocent gleeful laughter.

'Have your own way then, you wilful creature!'

'It is my mother's voice,' cries Angus, starting from the sofa.

'Yes! and *with Mr. Le Mesurier*,' replies Mrs. Bond grimly.

At this moment Mr. Bond, who has remained in hiding in the dining-room during the strangers' visit, appears in the hall, and confronts Delia.

'Are you home?' she exclaims with surprise. 'O! what will Mrs. Hephzibah think of my running away in this fashion? Where is she?'

'I am here,' replies Mrs. Bond, from the

precincts of the drawing-room ; ‘and ready to receive you, Delia.’

‘O ! my dear friend,’ she says, coming forward with a huge parcel in her arms ; ‘how can I excuse myself to you—but Mr. Le Mesurier will help to tell my story. A most wonderful thing has happened. I have found——’

But here the mother, having crossed the threshold, first perceives there are strangers in the drawing-room—next, regards them for a moment, curiously—and then, with a loud cry in which there is no sound but that of unalloyed happiness, drops her parcel on the ground, and rushing to the outstretched arms of her son, throws herself into them and weeps unrestrainedly.

‘O, my boy ! my boy ! My precious, precious boy ! My hope, my treasure, my child ! Do I hold you in my arms again ? O, my Angus ! my darling ! where have you

come from? How did you know your mother was here? Is it my tears that have drawn you to me? I have never lain down in my bed, Angus, without weeping the bitterest tears for you, and a thousand times I have resolved to break my oath sooner than endure the hell I suffered apart from you. But it was for *your* sake, darling, for your dear sake! And now you are come—we are together once more, and I have the most wonderful news to tell you. I——’

‘I guess it, dearest mother!’ he says sadly.

‘Do not give yourself the pain of telling it.’

‘But it is not pain—it is great, great joy. My dear friend, Mr. Le Mesurier——’

‘Hush, hush! The baron is here.’

‘Baron Saxe!’ cries Delia, becoming instantly covered with blushes, as she raises herself to look at him.

‘Yes, madame!’ says the baron, now compelled to speak, though huskily, ‘and no one

will rejoice more in your happiness than I shall !

‘ But you do not know it yet ! You have not heard——’

‘ Can’t you see that they don’t *want* to hear ?’ interrupts Mrs. Hephzibah ungraciously.

‘ *Do not want to hear !* But that is impossible. It is what we have all been living for.’

‘ You may—perhaps.’

‘ O ! you cannot understand me ! Mr. Le Mesurier, pray come here and let me introduce you to my dear son Angus Moray—before I disclose these happy tidings to him.’

The parson bows to the two gentlemen, who return his courtesy but stiffly.

‘ You seem determined that everybody shall be as pleased at this business as yourself,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah.

‘O, they will! They shall be! Angus, my darling!’ says Delia suddenly. ‘Are you married?’

‘No, mother! I refused to be till I had seen your good name upheld before the world. *I* could not accept happiness whilst *you* were sorrowing,’ he adds, with forced emphasis; ‘and I have travelled England ever since (aided by our good friend the baron), in order to try and prove the lie my uncle told of you. And in our search we were directed to Cloverfield, though without the slightest idea that we should find you here.’

‘My own brave faithful boy!’ she cries. ‘How good of you, and how good of the baron! I feel I can never give you love enough—nor he, thanks enough—for what you have done in my service. But your reward is close at hand. *I have found the certificate.*’

‘*What !*’ exclaim the whole company simultaneously.

‘I have found my marriage certificate,’ she repeats hysterically. ‘Thank God for ever and ever for it ! It is that which took me from home, Mrs. Hephzibah. I knew it was wrong to go away in your absence, but so great an issue was at stake. I found out that Simon Strother had been clerk at Chilton when the church was burned down, and suspected he carried the vestry-books about with him in a parcel which he never permitted any one to look at. He was out of his mind, you know. Yesterday, finding that I had attempted to undo his parcel, he ran away from Cloverfield, taking it with him, and when I heard the news, I followed him as far as Winchester——’

‘You and Mr. Le Mesurier, you mean,’ interposed Mrs. Hephzibah.

‘No,’ replies Delia, blushing ; ‘Mr. Le

Mesurier did not join me till this morning. And we discovered the old man in a dying state, and we got the parcel and found it contained these volumes, in a very dilapidated and burned condition ; but my certificate was safe, and Mr. Le Mesurier has it in that book, and I—I am the very happiest woman on the face of the earth,’ says Delia, as she bursts into a flood of tears, and hides her face once more on the arms of her son.

‘ And you are not married to him, then ?’ demands Mrs. Hephzibah.

‘ *Married !* Married to whom ?’

‘ To the parson there ?’

‘ Good gracious ! my dear friend ! Whatever made such an idea enter your head ? He is a married man already.’

‘ Well, I *am* a fool !’ soliloquises Mrs. Bond, in a crestfallen manner ; but her husband pats her arm in contradiction of the

statement, and she recovers her equanimity with wonderful rapidity.

‘If you’re married, where’s your wife?’ she says to Le Mesurier.

‘She is at Winchester at present, Mrs. Bond; but I hope before long to introduce her in Cloverfield. Untoward circumstances have separated us for some years past, but owing to Mrs. Manners’ energy in searching for her certificate, we met again by the most wonderful coincidence, and I rejoice to say that all is peace between us once more.’

‘Well, every one seems to be in luck to-day,’ says Mrs. Bond; ‘myself as much as any,’ she adds, with a squeeze of the little lawyer’s hand.

‘Am I to be the only unlucky one left out, madame?’ says the baron in a low voice, as he takes a seat on the other side of Delia.

‘I hope not, baron. I trust your future will be as bright as that of any of us!’

‘It is in your power to make it so, Delia.’

‘What, have you not yet forgotten the old folly?’ she says, with a happy smile.

Angus gets hold of his mother’s hand, and places it in that of his friend.

‘Will it make you happy if I leave it there, my precious boy?’

‘Very happy, dearest mother.’

‘Then it shall be just as Gustave wishes.’

‘Gustave will never give it up again,’ the baron answers, as he raises her hand to his lips.

‘O my God!’ sighs Delia reverently, as she sits between her future husband and her son, ‘I thank Thee Who hast accepted an atonement for my lie.’

THE END.

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